THE MISSING INITIAL

NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN

The reader of mystery stories will have a delectable time in following through the twists of the plot of this novel. Natalie Sumner Lincoln has in it written a murder mystery which fully lives up to her reputation as a writer of absolutely baffling and fascinating stories. The secret is kept safe until the very closing chapters and the hide-and-seek urge of suspicion holds one on every page. At the book's opening the heroine, a reporter on one of the big newspapers of Washington, D. C., sees from her apartment window a man stabbed in the back, at night in another apartment across the courtyard. The victim is a rich man, well-known in Washington's business and social circles. Who killed him and what was the motive? It is in the social and diplomatic sets that the search unfolds. Norma Page works with the detectives and plays a leading part in the final solution of the mystery. The criminal proves to be able in an amazing degree to cover up his tracks before being finally run to earth, and suspense runs high. Throughout there is the pleasing thread of Norma's love story. The title of the novel refers to a torn handkerchief from which an initial is missing and which is an essential clue.

The
MISSING INITIAL

BY

NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN

AUTHOR OF "THE THIRTEENTH LETTER," "THE UNSEEN EAR," "THE TREVOR CASE," ETC.

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TO

MRS. VIOLET BLAIR JANIN

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CHAPTER I

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

A CRY cut the stillness of the hot September night with vibrating intensity. As the last note died out Norma Page sat upright in bed and stared bewildered into the darkness, one hand pressed against her fast-beating heart. The sky was overcast and neither moon nor stars were out, so she distinguished but dimly the wicker furniture on the sleeping porch. Her startled gaze swept the backs of the adjacent buildings, but all the windows giving upon the porch were dark.

The cry was not repeated and Norma, after listening intently for fully five minutes, lay down again, convinced that it must have been the aftermath of a distorted dream conjured up by her overexcited brain.

The bed she occupied, while small, was vastly more comfortable than the sleeper which had brought

her from Maine and, in spite of the humid heat which makes September in Washington, the nation's capital, almost unbearable, she had slept fairly well during the first part of the night. Norma forebore her impulse to switch on the reading lamp near her bed, preferring instead to lie still and mentally review the events of the summer. It had been her first real vacation since joining the staff of the Washington *Post* as a feature writer, and she had enjoyed her trip to New England to the utmost. While en route home she had met at a hotel in Boston her cousin, Penelope Page Laughton. The chance encounter had brought her good fortune in the proffer of the Laughton apartment until the return of Mrs. Laughton in November.

Mrs. Laughton, whose popularity in Washington society was undisputed, had conceived a deep affection for Norma in the days when the latter had acted as her social secretary. She had noticed with concern Norma's none too robust appearance and had promptly invited her to spend the rest of the summer traveling with her. But Norma, with a tenacity which characterized her family, insisted that she still had to make good in her newspaper work, and, therefore, could not take a longer holiday.

Mrs. Laughton had learned of old that Norma would not accept financial support even from her cousin, and secretly admiring the young girl's self-

reliant spirit which scorned all favors, with the tact which had gained her many a point in her social career, she had exerted her persuasive powers to induce Norma to occupy her new apartment in Washington, rent free, during her absence.

Norma assumed a more comfortable position in bed—the humanlike cry, possibly sounded by some alley cat in its midnight prowl, had not been repeated, but for the time being it had banished sleep. She turned on her pillow and glanced at her wrist watch, lying on the small wicker table almost at her elbow; its luminous dial showed the hands pointing to two o'clock.

Five more hours, at the least, before she could go downstairs to the café and get her breakfast. Not that she was hungry, but the prospect of spending five hours lying awake—Norma bit her lip and brushed her fingers across her moistened eyelids. What nonsense to give way to an attack of nerves! She *had* been asleep; what matter if fitful, uneasy slumber. It had brought relaxation and forgetfulness in its train. She would—she *must* think of something beside the letter, which she had received in her mail that night at the city post office, en route from the Union Station. Her thoughts strayed for an instant to her arrival at the Van Vleet in the fashionable residential section of Sixteenth Street shortly after eight o'clock in the evening. She had been

met at the entrance by an attentive doorman, and her modest luggage had been carried to her cousin's twelve-room apartment by an elevator boy.

A hot bath had removed the tired ache from her body and the grime of travel, and Norma, after a cursory glance about the big apartment, had selected one of the bedrooms giving entrance to the screened sleeping porch and, securing linen from the well-stocked linen closet, she had made her bed and crawled thankfully into it.

Norma had purposely let none of her friends know of her expected return. There was much she had to thresh out by herself; not even to Penelope Laughton, as highly as she esteemed her, had she confided her most cherished secret—Sir Gilbert Montagu's proposal of marriage and her promise to give him her answer when next she saw him. All through the summer Montagu's ardent letters had pressed his suit; telegrams, candy, flowers—the little delicate, tender attentions which women hold so dear—none had been lacking, and Norma's stubborn resolve to carve out a literary career for herself before becoming engaged, had almost given way before the Englishman's desperate pleading; almost, but not quite.

In thrusting her arm under her pillow, Norma's fingers touched a letter, and she slowly drew it out. No need to turn on the light at her elbow; the few

lines it contained, as well as its signature, were burned into her brain:

Your contemplated engagement to my nephew is absurd [so the letter ran]. Two paupers cannot marry—each other. Gilbert will inherit my money on one condition only: that he does not marry you.

Norma's eyes blazed in righteous wrath. How dared Clifford Burton address her in that manner? How dared he think—

Across the small courtyard which separated the Van Vleet from another apartment house, a feeble light flickered unevenly through one of the windows opening upon it; and as the light grew stronger it arrested Norma's attention. Sitting upright, she peered forward and saw a man advance, a candle held high in his right hand. As he paused and gazed furtively about, she caught a full view of his face, and a faint cry escaped her involuntarily.

The man lowered his candle so that its rays fell on an object in his right hand, then raised it to peer ahead. Placing the candlestick upon the desk, he stooped over. The next instant the light shining across his bent back was obscured by a shadowy hand grasping a dagger. The dagger, poised in air one breathless second, reflected the light in its burnished steel, then was thrust sharp and true into human flesh. Without a sound, the man fell face downward across the desk.

Three times Norma tried to scream for aid, but only a gurgle passed her dry lips. Staggering to her feet, she swayed rather than walked across the intervening space—she had not realized the width of the sleeping porch—until she reached the bedroom. As her trembling fingers pushed the electric switch and the room was flooded with light, she found herself still clutching Burton's letter. With a cry of horror, she flung it from her—she had just witnessed Clifford Burton's murder across the courtyard.

CHAPTER II

THE CRIMSON STAIN

SLOWLY, Norma regained her benumbed faculties. Drawing her hand across her eyes as if awakening from a frightful nightmare, she whirled about and dashed to the edge of the screened porch, but she could detect no ray of light in any of the buildings across the courtyard. All were dark, silent—with no sign of human habitation.

Her fingers trembling, in spite of every effort to be calm, Norma dressed with a speed that she had never before attained. Then, taking the precaution to turn on the electric lights before entering each room, she made a complete circuit of the apartment —except for herself the place was empty. Its musty, close atmosphere had not been entirely dissipated by the fresh air coming through the three windows which Norma had opened upon her arrival. The cretonne-covered furniture and pictures and pieces of statuary carefully hidden behind protecting cheesecloth, cast weird shadows which were not quieting to the nerves, and she shuddered involuntarily as she ran to the door leading to the public corridor.

As she raced around the corner in the direction of

the elevator shaft, she came in violent contact with a man advancing toward her.

"Beg pardon!" he exclaimed, throwing out a steadying hand as she reeled backward; then, in a voice that penetrated even her confused sense of unreality: "Norma!"

"Gilbert!" Her eyes swept upward to his face and the pupils, already dilated, grew even larger as she took in the Englishman's altered appearance—gone was the heavy beard and mustache he had worn since his arrival from Europe six months before. "You *here*?"

"Jolly fortunate, isn't it?" He laughed softly in pure joy at again beholding her. "Ah, Norma, you little witch, the days have been long and lonely without you. And now," catching her hand in both of his, "you will give me my answer—the answer I've been praying for?"

"Hush! I couldn't—"

"Ah, don't keep me longer in suspense," he pleaded. "Heart's dearest, you will marry me? Say but the one word, 'yes.' "

She shook her head. "Wait," she murmured faintly, and winced as she caught the look of pain which flashed into his eyes.

"Do you find pleasure in tormenting me?" he asked bitterly. Becoming conscious of her pallor and the tenseness of her attitude, he demanded, in altered

tones: "Is Uncle Cliff the cause of your hesitancy?"

Norma's strength deserted her suddenly, and she leaned limply against the wall, thankful for its support. Far differently had her imagination pictured her home-coming and meeting with Sir Gilbert Montagu, attaché of the British Embassy in Washington. Twice she strove for speech.

"Gilbert," she stammered, through trembling lips, "I have just seen your uncle murdered."

Montagu's walking stick fell with a clatter on the bare floor of the corridor; except for his heavy breathing, it was the only sound to break the frozen silence. Suddenly he burst into laughter—harsh, discordant.

"Your imagination is running away with you," he declared, checking his unseemly mirth as he caught her horrified stare, and added, more gently: "You have been dozing, sweetheart, and suffered from nightmare."

"It was no nightmare," she retorted stubbornly. "I was lying awake on the sleeping porch and, through a window of an apartment across the courtyard, I distinctly saw Clifford Burton stabbed in the back."

Montagu stooped over and picked up his cane; the act appeared mechanical, or so she judged from his far-away look, when he again stood upright, his face was expressionless.

"Frankly, I don't understand," he admitted, and held up his hand as she was about to interrupt him; "many things—for instance, your presence here in the Van Vleet."

"I am occupying Penelope Laughton's apartment in my cousin's absence," she explained, her words tumbling over one another. "I returned to-night—that is, yesterday—it's morning now." She stopped and, taking a fresh breath, asked, with increasing vehemence: "What are *you* doing here?"

As the question shot from her, Montagu's figure stiffened, but his answer was unhesitating.

"Booked a flat here yesterday and took possession before luncheon," he replied. "Norma, dearest, let me take you to your rooms and call a physician—"

"A policeman, you mean," she interjected hotly. "Have you forgotten the—the—" she stumbled over the word—"the murder?"

"Certainly not," with stern emphasis. "But I must insist that you return to your quarters; then I will investigate."

"Indeed, you will not leave me alone in my apartment!" Norma shivered. "I'll go with you," and she started down the corridor.

But the young diplomat held back. "Just consider, Norma," he begged. "If Uncle Cliff has been —eh—killed, the—eh—details won't—eh—be pleasant for a woman."

Norma hardly gave him time to complete his halting sentence.

"I am going with you." Her voice, high-pitched, with a hint of hysteria, trailed behind her as she continued with unslackened speed toward the elevator shaft.

Montagu watched the slight, graceful figure disappear around the corner of the corridor, his monocle dangling from its black cord, and then, with a characteristic shake of his broad shoulders, he hurried after Norma and reached the elevator shaft just as the boy was about to close the door.

"Down!" and at the low-spoken, stern command, the half-awake negro held the elevator. As he pulled the door to and depressed the lever, he missed Montagu's imperative sign to Norma enjoining silence. An instant later the elevator stopped at the ground floor, and Montagu waited courteously for Norma to precede him. She reached the sidewalk first and turned to him, wonderment plainly discernible in her expressive countenance.

"Why did you stop me when I started to speak to the boy?" she questioned. "I only intended to ask the name of the apartment behind the Van Vleet."

"We can find out by going there—come." And Montagu's tone brooked no argument.

Norma's nimble feet flew over the pavement in her effort to keep up with her companion's long, swift

stride. They traversed the short cross-street in silence, meeting no other pedestrians, then swung into New Hampshire Avenue; a right-hand turn, and they paused simultaneously in front of a tall but narrow building.

"This must be it," declared Norma; "the other is too far down the block. But how silly of me! Of course, you know where your uncle lived."

"Certainly," grimly. "And it wasn't here. His home is in Hillyer Place."

Norma raised a helpless hand to her aching forehead. "I had forgotten for the moment," she admitted confusedly. "But what, then, was Mr. Burton doing in this apartment house at this hour of the night?"

"That is what I must find out." Montagu scanned the building closely. "This place has no name, only a street number—"

"You are right—1905— Why, I have been here before! It's where—" she got no further.

"Come!" broke in the Englishman imperatively. Running up a few steps, he held open the swing door and they entered the lighted foyer. But repeated ringing of the elevator bell brought no response.

"Perhaps they don't have all-night service," suggested Norma. "Let's run upstairs." Observing his hesitation, she added with warmth: "We mustn't waste time."

"Be reasonable, Norma," protested Montagu heatedly. "We don't know which apartment to go to. I must find the janitor or a policeman."

As he spoke, his eyes lighted on the house telephone. It took but a minute to locate the janitor's call, but the seconds dragged interminably before a door at the end of the foyer opened and a man, half-dressed, appeared. At sight of Norma he retreated precipitously, but Montagu's first words arrested him.

"What's that, sir?" he demanded. "You say this young lady saw a man stabbed in an apartment in this building? Sure, she's mistaken entirely; me an' Jim Doyle have been playin' cards most of the night, in the room beyond, and nary a sound have we heard."

"There was no noise," protested Norma; "no fight—but a crime has been committed in an apartment on the seventh floor of this building."

"A crime?" echoed a voice behind them and Doyle, who had followed his friend, the janitor, more leisurely, joined the little group. "A crime, is it? What about it, mister?" and turning back the lapel of his coat he displayed his badge. "I'm attached to the central office at police headquarters."

"Thank heaven!" exclaimed Norma impetuously. "Then take us up to the back apartment on the seventh floor."

Doyle wheeled on the janitor. "Who lives there, Pat?" he asked.

"No wan, now; it's for rint furnished."

Doyle was the first to reach the elevator, Pat McGuire at his heels.

"Take us up there," directed the central office detective. "Do you think the young lady had better come, sir?" with a questioning lift of his eyebrows, as Norma slid inside the closing door.

"Of course, I'm coming," she retorted, giving Montagu no chance to reply. "Oh, do hurry—"

The admonition was hardly needed, for McGuire shot the elevator upward with sickening speed, bringing it to a careful stop at the seventh floor with a nice exactness, which won Doyle's silent commendation. It was but a step from the elevator shaft to the door of the back apartment, and they grouped themselves about the janitor as he drew out a bunch of keys chained to his trousers' pocket.

"Just a moment, sir," as Montagu moved impatiently. "I'll find the pass key—here it be."

There was a pause as the door swung inward, then McGuire, reaching past Doyle, switched on the electric light in the square reception hall. No one was visible, and at a sign from Doyle, his companions tiptoed inside, and the door was closed behind them. Still in silence they gained the center of the hall, and then Norma, through the opposite door-

way, caught a glimpse of what appeared to be the living room and darted toward it, Doyle at her heels. It took him a second to locate the electric switch, but as the light was flashed on, a gasp escaped him, and he threw out his hand, shading Norma's eyes from the tragedy before them.

Stretched across the low library table lay the figure of a man, head downward, and both arms outflung. The handle of a knife protruded ominously from under the left shoulder blade, and from beneath it trickled an ever-widening stream of blood.

With one bound Sir Gilbert Montagu gained the slain man's side and bent over him. When he looked up, every vestige of color was gone from his horrified countenance.

"It is Uncle Cliff!" he gasped. "And he's dead."

"Stabbed!" supplemented Doyle. "Say, miss, hadn't you better go?" as Norma reeled back against a bookcase and pressed her clenched hand against her lips to suppress a scream. In spite of having anticipated tragedy, the horror of the scene appalled her.

Hardly conscious of her act, she advanced a few steps and gazed intently at the dead man. She had every reason to despise Clifford Burton; but his convulsed features, on which fear was unmistakably stamped, brought a revulsion of feeling—of pity, tinged with regret. Why had the lawyer misused the talents God had given him? Undeniably handsome,

with a sardonic wit which had too often given offense, and utterly unscrupulous in his relations with both men and women, Burton had gone his headstrong way, and now he lay before them—dead. Norma drew in her breath sharply.

"I'm all right," she stammered. "D—d—don't mind me. Who—who—do you suppose killed your uncle, Gilbert?"

Montagu raised his head and gazed at her blankly. With face nearly as ashen as that of the dead man, the family resemblance between uncle and nephew was marked.

"I don't know," he muttered. His eyes dropped before hers, then abruptly he turned his back upon her and scanned the library. It was a large, handsomely furnished room with long French windows. Two of them, which gave upon a narrow, iron balcony, were open.

"You witnessed the crime through these windows, Norma," he added, raising his voice, and Doyle, on his way from stationing the janitor at the front door of the apartment, paused in the entrance to the library. "Could you identify Uncle Cliff's companion?"

"No, I saw only your uncle—and the shadowy hand holding the dagger—" Norma paused, startled by a sudden spasmodic twitching of Montagu's features. "Are you ill, Gilbert?"

He shook his head as he drew out his handkerchief and wiped away the beads of moisture which had gathered on his forehead.

"It's hot, horribly hot," he muttered. "Well, Doyle, what's to be done?"

"I must notify police headquarters, sir. Don't touch the body—it must rest just so until the coroner gets here. Nothing must be disturbed." Doyle spoke with authority, and Norma drew back abashed. "Where's the telephone?"

Montagu spied the instrument first and pointed toward it.

"In the alcove, there."

Doyle was not alone in leaving the library. With one accord, Norma and Montagu trooped after him. The majesty of death, the mute, pathetic figure on the table—each inspired a sudden overpowering desire for living companionship and light.

As they waited for Doyle to awaken a sleepy central, there came to them distinctly the sound of a snore. Doyle listened for a moment; then, laying down the receiver, motioned for absolute silence and, noiseless as a cat, stole along the hall to a bedroom, the door of which stood open.

Montagu, close at his heels, paused, with one nervous finger on the electric light button, while Doyle, his revolver cocked and ready, stepped over to a couch, on which Norma made out the dim out-

lines of a figure. As the light flashed on, Doyle's hand dropped to his side, and his mouth fell open, his stern challenge unspoken.

The figure on the bed stirred restlessly, then the sleepy eyes unclosed and gazed up at the silent group about him. With one flying leap he gained the center of the room, but his rush for the door was checked by Montagu's hand on his collar, and the mud-stained, barefooted boy was whirled about to face them.

"Hello, Cousin Norma!" he exclaimed, smiling up at her, one mischievous dimple plainly visible. "Kinda s'prised to see me, ain't you?"

Norma got back her wits with difficulty.

"Bobby!" she exploded. "Bobby Laughton! What are you doing here?"

"Ran away from grandmother," was the smiling reply. "And came here to be with dad. Haven't seen him, have you?"

CHAPTER III

BY SPECIAL MESSENGER

CORONER PENFIELD turned at Detective Doyle's entrance and looked across at Inspector Mitchell.

"Well, Doyle, what news?" he asked.

Doyle saluted the inspector. "Miss Page has just gone out with the boy to get breakfast," he explained. "She left word that they wouldn't be long."

Penfield frowned impatiently. "Slow work, Doyle," he commented dryly, and the detective colored.

"It wasn't my fault, sir," he protested, with some heat. "The inspector—"

"It's all right, Doyle," interposed Mitchell hurriedly. "Both Miss Page and little Bobby Laughton are under surveillance, Doctor Penfield; they can't get away. Is everything in this room just as you found it early this morning, Doyle? Look about you carefully."

Doyle heeded the injunction. The curtains had been pulled back, and the library was flooded with sunlight. There was no sign of disorder, every piece of furniture appeared in its place; only the

desk ornaments on the broad mahogany table near the window were knocked about. The table's sinister burden had been removed an hour earlier to an undertaking establishment, but the bloodstains, now a dirty brown, were a mute reminder of the tragedy of the early morning.

"A strange crime," commented Coroner Penfield softly, as Detective Doyle glanced from one part of the large room to the other. "I knew Clifford Burton slightly, like many another—it is doubtful if any one really knew him intimately."

"A cold-blooded fish," admitted Mitchell, "judging from what others say of him. What brought Burton to this apartment last night?"

Penfield answered the question with another. "Who lives here?"

"Mrs. Rutherford Laughton, the mother of Commander Thomas Laughton of the navy," responded Mitchell. "She is also the grandmother of Bobby Laughton—the boy whom Doyle found here last night."

"A small boy and a dead man alone in the apartment," broke in Doyle. "Sure, gentlemen, it gave me the creeps—one here and the other in his bedroom."

"Are you positive, Doyle, that some one else was not concealed in the apartment and slipped out when you and the others were with Bobby?" questioned

Mitchell. "The boy's bedroom is at the far end of the apartment."

"True, sir, but I had stationed McGuire, the janitor, at the door of the apartment," explained Doyle. "No one could have left without his seeing him. I'll take my dying oath that when we entered this apartment there was no one here but the dead man and Bobby; and what's more, there's no trace of any one else having been here. I have searched every room and closet a dozen times."

"The boy could not have struck that blow," objected Penfield. "You say he is only twelve years old, Mitchell?"

"About that," impatiently. "But for all his youth I can get nothing out of him, except that he had reached this apartment about nine o'clock last night, slipped upstairs unseen, entered, and gone immediately to bed and to sleep."

"Was he confronted with the body?"

"Yes." Mitchell's gesture was expressive. "The gruesome sight shook him a bit; he grew white and stammered and stuttered, but all that I got out of him was what I have told you. For a youngster, he has remarkable grit." Mitchell paused and cleared his throat. "He said only one significant thing, and that when first awakened. He asked his cousin, Miss Page, if she had seen his father."

"The lad implied that he had come to meet his

father," added Doyle. "Have you located Commander Laughton, sir?"

Inspector Mitchell shook his head and changed the subject abruptly.

"Get Pat McGuire, Doyle," he directed; and as the detective hurried away, he turned to the coroner. "I'd like to hear something about Mrs. Laughton and her son from the janitor; he may be able to give us points," he stopped. "This whole apartment is well furnished, but it looks so—so—" casting about for a word.

"So stiff and formal," agreed Penfield. "But then it has evidently been closed for the summer. The apartment is much larger than I at first thought; it is deceptive in size. How many rooms are there, Mitchell?"

"Nine—four master's bedrooms, three baths, one servant's room and bath, this library, reception hall, dining room, pantry, and kitchen," Mitchell checked them off on his finger. "Here's McGuire now;" then in a louder key as the janitor hovered uncertainly in the doorway, "come and sit down, McGuire; Coroner Penfield wishes to ask you a few questions."

Penfield was struck with the janitor's pleasant, homely face as the latter returned his curt nod with a deferential bow. The man's clothing, although worn and patched in spots, was neat and clean; and the coroner shrewdly suspected that he had spruced

up for the interview, which McGuire knew he would have to face with police officials and representatives of the press.

"It is a shocking affair, sir," he commented respectfully. "Mr. Thorpe, the owner of the apartment house, is very savage over the notoriety it has brought us. It's the first time in the four years I've been janitor that we've ever had any trouble with our tenants." He paused and glanced about the room, and his mild blue eyes noted carefully the condition of the furniture and, in marked contrast, the crimson stain on the big white blotter lying on the table near the window. "A queer affair," he added, "and to think of its happening in old Mrs. Laughton's apartment, of all people!"

"Has Mrs. Laughton had this apartment for a long period?" asked Mitchell, as Penfield drew out his notebook and pencil and roughly sketched an outline of the room.

"Going on two years," replied McGuire. "She liked it fust rate until her daughter-in-law, Bobby's mother, rented the apartment in the building across the courtyard there," turning and pointing out of the window. "Then she decided to sublet it furnished, and took Bobby and went up to Blue Ridge Summit."

"Ah, then she and young Mrs. Laughton do not get on?"

"So they say," cautiously. "Young Mrs. Laugh-

ton never came here to my knowledge, but Bobby used to talk to his mother from that balcony there," pointing to the low, iron grille in front of the long French windows which, by courtesy, was considered a balcony. Only a small and slender person could stand on it with any degree of comfort, and that at eminent risk of losing his balance.

Penfield laid down his pencil and looked attentively at McGuire.

"Did Commander Thomas Laughton live here with his mother?" he asked.

McGuire shook his head. "He's never been here, sir," the janitor explained. "Mrs. Laughton said that her son was on sea duty. She and her grandson live alone."

"Ah, then you have never seen Commander Laughton?"

"No, sir; only his photograph," McGuire hesitated. "Bobby showed it to me. He looks to be the splittin' image of his father. There's the Commander's picture on that high mantel, sir."

"So!" Penfield pushed back his chair and crossed the library to the fireplace. The room was large, with heavy velvet hangings and family portraits on the walls. A touch of modern life had been given in the pale blue covering of the beautiful old furniture, each piece an heirloom, and three electric lamps.

Penfield drew out his eyeglasses and carefully inspected the photograph in its handsome silver frame. The face confronting him bespoke strength of character in the broad forehead and the firm, determined mouth. The handsome eyes, under heavy brows, had a direct look which gave the beholder a sense of security and trust.

Coroner Penfield replaced the silver frame on the mantel with a feeling of growing mystification. The murder of a prominent Washington attorney in the apartment of an elderly woman while at the same time that same woman's twelve-year-old grandson slept in a hall bedroom close at hand, had all the elements of a sensational crime, verging on scandal.

Penfield turned to Inspector Mitchell with some abruptness and lowered his voice to a confidential pitch.

"Are Commander Laughton and his wife divorced?" he asked.

"No," responded Mitchell in the same tone. "Just separated, and the father took the child. At least, that's what Sir Gilbert Montagu told me this morning—the nephew of the murdered man, you know."

Penfield nodded. "I met him," he said. "Sir Gilbert left with his uncle's body, before I had an opportunity to have a long talk with him. He did say, however, that he is attached to the British Embassy."

The coroner turned and beckoned to McGuire,

who had walked to the further end of the library, and stood passively waiting. "McGuire, was Clifford Burton a frequent caller on old Mrs. Laughton?"

The janitor shook his head. "He came here a number of times, sir, last winter, but Mrs. Laughton was out each time." McGuire hesitated, and looking cautiously around, came a step closer. "I know, because after the scene last May, I axed the elevator boys if they'd seen him here before, and that's what they told me."

"To what scene do you refer?" questioned Mitchell swiftly.

"I was running the elevator one day, because Joe was sick," explained McGuire, "an' this here Mr. Clifford Burton come and said he was expected an' to take him to Mrs. Laughton. I done so, an' he was admitted by the maid, Celeste, who, after tellin' her mistress he was in the library, went out on an errand. I come up about fifteen minutes later to leave a package from the grocery an' there was Mrs. Laughton in the door, a-shovin' Mr. Burton out of her apartment, an' she says, says she:

" 'McGuire, never let this person inside my apartment. If he comes, turn him over to the police, for he's a crook.' "

"What happened next?" demanded Mitchell, as McGuire paused, conscious of the interest his story had created.

"Mr. Burton smiled sort of funny, bowed gracefully, and got in the elevator," McGuire added. "He didn't seem a bit flustered, and laughed and joked on the way down about facetious old ladies; but he didn't come again, to my knowledge, and Mrs. Laughton and Bobby left a week later for Blue Ridge Summit."

"And how did Burton get inside this apartment last night?" put in Penfield, swiftly.

McGuire shook a bewildered head. "Divil a wan of us knows," he declared, his brogue becoming more pronounced. "I was playin' beyond wid Detective Doyle, who shares me quarters in the basement, until nearly two o'clock this mornin', an' he'll bear me out, we heard nawthin'. The nayger, Joe, who was on the elevator last night, quit at midnight."

"Ah, and Joe's address?" demanded Mitchell.

The janitor consulted a much-thumbed memorandum book. "Eleven-nineteen Twentieth Street," he announced, putting the notebook back in his pocket. "Joe's the night boy now, he's worked here goin' on a year, an' every wan of our tenants has a decent word for him. He comes on duty at six o'clock at night, leastways"—McGuire would have added more, but a commotion at the further end of the apartment interrupted him, and with one accord the three men went in the direction of the voices raised in altercation.

Detective Doyle turned at their approach and released his grip on the messenger boy's arm.

"A note for Commander Laughton," he explained. "The boy refuses to leave it in the absence of the Commander."

The messenger removed his cap at sight of Coroner Penfield.

"I was told to give it to the gentleman personally," he stammered. "This here," with a resentful glance at Doyle, "must think he's the whole cheese, he's so free with his orders."

Penfield held out his hand. "Let me have the note," he said, persuasively, and his genial smile invited confidence. "Commander Laughton is expected here at any moment, and I will see that he receives the note immediately. I am Dr. Penfield. Let me sign your book," and before the messenger could utter a further protest, the coroner had scrawled his name on the sheet and retired to the library, note in hand and Mitchell by his side.

Penfield paused near the center of the room and extended the note toward Mitchell.

"Here you are, Inspector," he said. "I turn it over to you."

Mitchell considered the sealed envelope in silence as he slowly spun it around in his fingers, noting the quality of the paper and its typewritten address with keen attention. Suddenly he roused himself and

motioning to the coroner to accompany him, led the way to the kitchen in the rear of the apartment. It was a larger room than apartment kitchens generally are, and was in immaculate condition. A moment's search revealed a small teakettle. Still in silence, Mitchell filled it with hot water from the spigot and lighting a burner, placed the kettle on the gas stove.

"Well?" questioned Penfield, as the inspector waited by the stove. "What's your plan?"

"To steam it open," and Mitchell raised the envelope. "The Commander will never know."

"Aren't you a bit previous?" quickly. "So far, Commander Laughton is in no way involved in the murder of Clifford Burton."

Some minutes elapsed before the inspector answered Penfield.

"Laughton isn't involved *yet*," he admitted, with slow emphasis. "But did you take a sense of the knife used to kill Burton?"

"Of course." With instant displeasure at the implied doubt of his powers of observation, the coroner spoke more rapidly than usual. "It was undoubtedly a Malay creese."

"A deadly weapon and one not often found in America," added Mitchell quietly. "And I learned from the Navy Department that Commander Laughton has just returned from a cruise with our fleet in Asiatic waters." The inspector held the flap of the

envelope over the steam from the spout of the kettle, and it slowly opened. Before Penfield could remonstrate further, if he had wished to, Mitchell pulled out the single sheet of notepaper and unfolded it.

For an instant he stared dumfounded at the few words in the center of the page.

"What gibberish is this?" he exclaimed. "Look—" and he thrust the sheet under Penfield's nose. The coroner adjusted his eyeglasses and, lowering the paper to the proper distance, stared at the sentence which, without punctuation and without capitals, ran as follows:

beware of the bear that walks like a man

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST CLUE

NORMA PAGE stared at her small cousin in perplexity. Apparently undisturbed by her intent regard, Bobby Laughton laid down his fork and knife and pushed back his chair.

"I can't eat any more, Cousin Norma," he said. "I've lost my appetite."

Norma smiled for the first time that morning. "Considering you have eaten eleven rice cakes, it's not surprising," she remarked. "Not to mention soft boiled eggs and a glass of milk." She put down the amount of their bill at the cashier's window and led the way out of the restaurant, Bobby trotting contentedly at her side, his bright eyes scanning the busy avenue with ever-increasing interest. Norma did not slacken her swift walk until she reached the Western Union Telegraph office.

Bobby, intent on an altercation between a traffic officer and an irate motorist, followed her mechanically inside the building, and it was not until she took up a telegraph blank and commenced to write that her errand dawned on him.

"Who are you writing to?" he asked quickly.

"Your grandmother."

"Oh, Cousin Norma, please, please don't." Norma wavered as she met his appealing gaze.

"But I must," she insisted gently. "Cousin Deborah will be frantic with anxiety when she finds you have run away."

"No, she won't, neither." Bobby shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "She'll just send for me to come back."

"Of course, Bobby; that's where you belong. Your father made her your guardian in his absence—" Norma stopped and regarded the small figure thoughtfully. There was a pathetic droop to Bobby's mouth which went straight to her heart.

Left almost entirely to the care of his grandmother, Mrs. Rutherford Laughton, Bobby had grown precocious beyond his years. Mrs. Laughton sent him to an excellent school, saw that he was properly provided with clothes, and discouraged any playmates of his own age. Instead, he was taken to call upon her friends when the whim seized her; his other spare hours were watched over by a tutor, whose chief qualification for the position was a subservient desire to fulfill Mrs. Laughton's slightest wish. In Mrs. Laughton's eyes the tutor was a model in every respect, but her grandson viewed Señor Lopez in a different light.

Bobby shivered in spite of the warmth of the day.

A thought occurred to him, and his expression brightened.

"Make it a day letter," he coaxed. "Then it will be too late for Señor Lopez to get here before night. Please, dear Cousin Norma; I promise to be awful good."

Norma gave his sturdy shoulder an affectionate pat, and laid down her pencil and the argument.

"After all, it will be better to telephone," she announced. "I can do that from the apartment. Come, Bobby, let's hurry"; and she left the telegraph office with such precipitancy that Bobby's startled exclamation was lost upon her. He checked his first inclination to impart certain information, the nature of which caused him many an inward chuckle, and instead contented himself with frequent side-long glances at his cousin as they hastened up Sixteenth Street.

Norma, immersed in her own thoughts, paid but slight attention to her small companion, and it was not until she was fitting her key in the lock of his mother's apartment that Bobby addressed her.

"I am not going in, thank you," he said; and Norma turned and gazed at him in surprise.

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed with vigorous emphasis. "Of course, you will stay here with me."

Bobby shook his head and shifted his cap from one hand to the other. "I can't, Cousin Norma," he

protested. "It's mother's apartment, and I promised father never to visit her."

Norma's expression altered for an instant, and the lad's comely face swam indistinctly before her, blurred by sudden tears which filled her eyes, as the pitiful tragedy came home to her—her cousin Penelope's marriage to Tom Laughton—supposedly a love match—followed by years of happiness, then misunderstanding, estrangement—and Bobby left to the care of his grandmother, who unhesitatingly admitted that she abhorred children.

"It's all right, Bobby," Norma began, conscious that her voice was not quite steady. "Your father would wish you to stay here under the present circumstances. Come in," and she pushed open the front door of the apartment.

"No." Bobby backed away beyond her reach. "A promise is a promise," and before she could remonstrate further, the lad was out of sight.

Norma reached the elevator too late to catch him. Her imperative ring finally brought the elevator back to her floor, and a grinning elevator boy informed her that Bobby had left the building.

"He said to tell you he was goin' to his grandma's apartment," the negro explained, "an' he'd wait fo' yo' thar."

Norma hesitated, divided between her desire to keep an eye on Bobby, whose adventurous spirit was

always getting him into trouble, and a wish to telephone the boy's whereabouts to his grandmother. The latter seemed the wiser course; it would not take long and Bobby would wait for her, of that she was convinced; she could even telephone to him; he adored answering the 'phone, she remembered that of old.

It seemed hours to Norma since she had left the Van Vleet to go with Sir Gilbert Montagu to investigate the scene she had witnessed through the window of the apartment across the courtyard. She had remained with Bobby in the hall bedroom of his grandmother's apartment while Detective Doyle had notified police headquarters and the coroner of the District of Columbia. She had kept the door of the hall bedroom tightly closed until the commotion made by the removal of Clifford Burton's body had caused her to peer into the corridor. Later, she and Bobby had seized a moment when every one was otherwise engaged to slip from the apartment, and leaving word with the janitor that they had gone to breakfast, she had taken Bobby down town. She had wondered that they had been left alone for so long a time, not realizing that both Inspector Mitchell and Coroner Penfield had but postponed interviewing them until later in the morning.

While alone with Bobby she had questioned him as to his presence in his grandmother's apartment

that night and what transpired there; only to be met with the vehement statement that he had arrived before ten o'clock, gone to his room, and slept soundly until awakened by her arrival with Detective Doyle and Sir Gilbert Montagu.

Not stopping to remove her hat, Norma went at once to the telephone instrument in the living room, intending to put in her call for Blue Ridge Summit, but her errand flew out of her mind at the sight of a figure near the doorway. Norma stopped short, her breath almost forsaking her.

"Penelope!" she gasped. "Penelope Laughton!"

Penelope advanced further into the room, and Norma impulsively sprang forward to meet her half way.

"Oh, Pen, dear, I am so precious glad you are here!" Norma's strong young arms administered a bear's hug as she kissed her cousin with all the ardor of her impetuous nature. Over her cousin's shoulder Penelope swept a penetrating glance about the room before returning the girl's greeting with equal warmth. "Have you heard about Cliff Burton's murder?"

Penelope nodded her head affirmatively. "I was just reading the headlines in the *Post* when I heard you come in," she answered. "Let's sit down over yonder," and she adroitly piloted Norma to the big divan in one corner of the room, so placed that it

had a commanding view of the long hallway leading to the front door of the apartment.

Penelope adjusted a cushion behind Norma's head and settled down beside her. It would have taken a more observant critic than Norma to detect the intense pallor concealed by the cleverly applied rouge; in her admiring eyes Penelope's beauty and merry wit were unexcelled by any young matron of her acquaintance.

Penelope's hair, which was that lovely shade that is neither golden nor red, but a happy mingling of both, was twisted in a big knot at the back of her shapely head, escaping into soft, tiny curls, that lay on her pretty forehead and nestled in the curve of her white throat just behind the dainty pink ears. But beautiful as her hair was, it was the charming eyes of almost golden brown that made Penelope Laughton's chief beauty. They were the eyes that sometimes, though rarely, accompany that shade of hair, and when nature sets them in a face of child-like bloom and puts a half shy, half wistful, gleam in them, they become about as irresistible a possession as a human being can be crowned with.

Penelope Page's marriage—in the same year of her début in society—to Tom Laughton had taken place in Washington, and Norma, several years her cousin's junior, had acted as her maid of honor, a thrilling moment in her boarding-school career. That

was fourteen years ago—Norma sighed involuntarily as she puffed her cigarette, busy with a problem which had vexed her thoughts—what had caused the rift in the lute and eventually brought about the Laughtons' separation? They had appeared so ideally happy. The affair had stirred society to its depths, for both Penelope and her husband were extremely popular, and the reason given for their marital troubles—incompatibility of temper—was not accepted as conclusive. But as Laughton had been ordered elsewhere and Penelope also had left Washington, it ceased to be a nine days' wonder and sank into oblivion. Tongues had wagged again when Penelope had appeared a year before and, taking a suite of rooms at a fashionable hotel, had entertained with a lavish hand. Inheriting a fortune from an uncle shortly after her husband's departure, she had drifted from one country to another in search of pleasure and forgetfulness, or so Norma had deducted from one or two remarks which Penelope had incautiously let fall in her hearing.

Norma put out her hand and touched her cousin. "It really is you!" she exclaimed, "and I am not dreaming? When I left you three days ago, you were on your way to Bar Harbor."

"I was obliged to change my plans." Penelope's grasp on Norma's hand tightened involuntarily. "Business reasons. They told me at the office down-

stairs that you arrived last night. And to think, Norma, that you saw Cliff murdered early this morning."

Norma shuddered. "Don't! I'd like to forget it," she begged. "Pen, you can't imagine how I felt. And—and—" in a sudden burst of confidence: "Gilbert Montagu was so—so—odd in his behavior—so unsympathetic."

Penelope's delicately arched brows met in a frown as she regarded Norma. The latter's pretty color had faded, and her big blue eyes were tragic. Sir Gilbert's attentions to Norma had been marked. Could it be that her sweet and gentle cousin was really in love with the big blond Englishman?

"Men hate to show emotion, dear," and her low, sympathetic tones were a tonic to Norma's troubled heart. "I imagine Sir Gilbert is somewhat like his uncle, self-contained and—eh—" Penelope hesitated and bit her lip, her next adjective would not have been complimentary to the young diplomat. Swiftly she switched to the subject uppermost in her mind. "To think that Cliff was murdered in Mrs. Laughton's home, of all places!" She drew a long breath. "What took him to that empty apartment?"

"It wasn't empty," corrected Norma. "Bobby was there last night."

"Bobby!" Penelope sprang to her feet, a dawning horror in her eyes. "Bobby!"

"Yes."

The effect of the monosyllable on Penelope was startling. With color drained from her lips, she stared, speechless, at her cousin. When she finally broke the silence, her voice was keyed to a high pitch.

"Do you mean that Bobby was in his grandmother's apartment last night? Bobby—my son?"

"I do. Your son—and he ought to be here this minute." Norma had found courage at last to voice her opinion. "Are you absolutely heartless? Can't you see that the boy should be here with you and not with that selfish, bad-tempered old woman?"

"Hush!" Penelope clapped her hand over Norma's mouth. "My God, you don't understand." Her voice broke abruptly, and to Norma's utter consternation Penelope broke down completely, her body wracked with tearless sobs.

At that moment Bobby was devoutly wishing that he had remained with Norma. He had reached his grandmother's apartment without delay, but the plain-clothes policeman at the door had admitted him under protest into the presence of Inspector Mitchell and Coroner Penfield. Bobby shrank back at sight of the two men, then gathering courage, advanced further into the library.

"What is your full name, Bobby?" questioned Coroner Penfield, and at the sound of his pleasant voice, Bobby's expression brightened.

"Robert Page Laughton, sir," he replied. "Did you want to see me?"

"Yes." Penfield pointed to a large chair near the one he occupied. "Sit down, Bobby, and tell Inspector Mitchell and me what brought you to Washington."

"I hooked a ride, sir," and at the lad's concise reply, Penfield smiled not unkindly.

"I mean, what was your errand here?" he explained.

"Nothing—I just wanted to run away." Bobby slid into the big chair, one eye cocked in Mitchell's direction; he was uncomfortably conscious of the inspector's uncompromising stare.

"And why did you wish to run away?" asked Penfield, patiently. "To meet your father here?" With marked emphasis on "father."

Bobby twiddled with a button on his coat, which he carried over his arm, before answering. "No, sir, not 'zactly," he said, stumbling over his words. "Leastways I thought p'raps he might be here, 'cause I heard grannie tell Señor Lopez father was ordered to Washington sometime soon." Bobby squirmed round in his seat as Mitchell, who had come closer, bent forward.

"Say, youngster, what's that red welt on your neck?" he asked; "there, just by your shoulder?" and he dragged down Bobby's shirt, exposing a num-

ber of bruises which drew an exclamation of pity from Penfield.

" 'Tain't nothin'," protested Bobby, trying to withdraw from Mitchell's grasp. "Grannie often wallops me."

"What for?" demanded Mitchell, struggling to retain his grasp on Bobby's shoulder and yet not hurt the boy.

"Grannie says she has to beat the devil out o' me—" in his endeavor to get away from Mitchell, Bobby dropped to the floor and the inspector was left with a piece of torn shirt in his hand. "It ain't none of your affair, mister, what she does to me!" and he glared indignantly at his inquisitor.

Mitchell looked at Penfield and raised his eyebrows. "How did you get in this apartment, Bobby?" he asked, and the boy blinked at the sudden change of topic.

"I slid the key off grannie's ring," he admitted. "The feller that gave me a ride in his Ford let me off down by Scott's Circle. It was dark then, and I guess nobody saw me when I came up to this apartment."

"And you talked with the elevator boy?" insinuatingly.

Bobby shook his head vigorously and wriggled into a more comfortable position on the floor, his legs half under the large couch before which he lay.

"I walked upstairs," he explained. "I didn't see any one."

"But you heard some one last night—in this apartment," broke in Penfield. "Some one quarreling, Bobby?"

"No." The denial was sharp and emphatic. "I was tired, and I just went to sleep."

Penfield considered the boy in silence for a minute. What he saw of Bobby he liked; but for all the bland innocence of the childish face, the coroner wondered if a lurking devil might not be concealed behind the big brown eyes, eyes which Bobby had inherited from his mother. His mop of light brown hair needed trimming badly. He tossed back his head to keep the long bang out of his eyes, and scrambled to his feet.

"If you aren't needing me now, I'll find Cousin Norma," he began, and was interrupted by a short exclamation from Mitchell.

"What's that on your shoe?" the latter demanded, and Bobby looked down hastily, as Mitchell leaned forward. "Hold up your foot, youngster—" and as Bobby did so— "A scrap of fly paper; stand steady now, and I'll take it off."

"Where did it come from?" asked Penfield.

"Under the sofa, most likely," replied Bobby. "I know I haven't been carryin' it around with me. Can't you get it off, mister?"

Mitchell straightened up, fly paper in hand, and faced Penfield, his eyes bright with interest. He was not looking at Bobby, and so failed to observe the boy's quick, furtive glance about the room.

"See here, Doctor Penfield," he said. "The table where we found Burton is there by the window. The window was open last night, and a draught from it would have carried this fly paper under the sofa and out of sight."

"Well, what of it?" demanded the coroner hastily.

"The boy's shoe wasn't the only thing sticking to it; look, sir," and Mitchell held out the fly paper. In one corner was a small piece of muslin stuck firmly to it. "What do you make of that, Doctor?"

Penfield adjusted his eyeglasses and regarded the muslin in silence for a minute.

"It looks like the corner of a handkerchief," he commented slowly.

"That's just what it is." Mitchell's voice was charged with excitement. "There is the letter 'L'; see, Doctor, the handkerchief has been cut in such a manner that the other initial is missing."

CHAPTER V

THE CUT DIRECT

BORIS BELOSELSKY, one-time chargé d' affaires in Washington of the great Russian Empire, laid aside his newspaper and regarded his visitor attentively.

"Ah!" he exclaimed softly. "And what brings you here?"

"The same errand as before," replied the other, speaking in English; his low, rather peculiar voice might have been Anglo-Saxon, although it suggested the Latin from its sibilant quality. "Money."

Beloselsky considered the answer in silence, then nodded gravely.

"Your wants are many, friend Lopez." He opened a drawer of his desk as he spoke and drew out a thin leather wallet and took from it several United States Treasury notes. "Fortunately the 'International' has paid a recent dividend and your share—" he paused to count the bills aloud—"one hundred, two hundred and fifty dollars—there you are."

With a murmured word of thanks, the man called Lopez leaned forward and picked up the

money, and after a careful inspection, which did not escape the keen eyes watching him under lowered lids, tucked it securely away in an inside pocket of his coat.

"The investment pays," he commented briefly, "better than I anticipated."

Beloselsky smiled with his lips only. "Oh, one of little faith!" His shrug was characteristic. "Always have you doubted." He paused and lowered his voice. "Alas, the 'International' has lost its chief promoter in the death of Clifford Burton."

The dapper figure across from Beloselsky rested tense against the tapestry covered chair back, while Lopez's hands caressed the mahogany arms with a grip of steel. However, the man's face gave no hint of the emotion which stirred him to the depths.

"Is Mr. Burton dead?" he asked, and his tone of polite interest was admirable.

Beloselsky rolled a cigarette with practiced fingers. "Murdered last night," he stated, "in the apartment of Mrs. Rutherford Laughton."

Lopez was on his feet, his eyes gleaming with excitement, all restraint apparently gone. "What is that you say?" he demanded. "Burton murdered in Mrs. Laughton's apartment—but that is not possible. The apartment is closed."

Beloselsky's shrug was expressive, also his gesture which showed his graceful hands and their long,

manicured nails. "Closed, you say?" he questioned. "Ah, then the newspaper is wrong, for you should know, unless," with sudden thought, "you are no longer in the employ of Mrs. Rutherford Laughton."

"I am still the tutor of her grandson—" the reply snapped from Lopez, his temper rising at the ill-concealed sneer on his companion's face. "We have been summering at Blue Ridge Summit," he paused in his rapid speech, "and the apartment has been closed in our absence."

"What brings you to Washington, then, if not this news?" and Beloselsky touched the newspaper spread on the table at his side.

Lopez tapped his vest pocket. "This, my friend," he said. "You pay, when I see you in person, whereas a letter—la, la!" His voice changed, and his manner altered. "I have not read the newspapers, and what you say is most serious. Mrs. Laughton will be much—" hesitating for a word—"agitated. I must return. *Adios,* señor"—and before Boris Beloselsky could guess his intention, he was out of the room and down the staircase, his flying steps deadened by the rubber-soled shoes he wore.

Beloselsky, taken by surprise, remained seated for several seconds, then springing up he rushed into the hall in time to hear the slam of a distant door as Lopez gained the front steps of the house and

went down the street. Beloselsky stood for a moment stroking his dark mustache before retracing his footsteps, but once inside his sitting room his expression changed. Making sure that the hall door was closed, he again drew out the thin leather wallet from its resting place in the desk drawer and slowly counted over the money it still contained in the concealed pocket. Apparently the sum pleased him, for his troubled air gave way to a gratified smile. Ten minutes later he was in his bedroom whistling a popular air as he dressed, selecting his socks and tie with commendable taste for a luncheon at the Army and Navy Club.

Boris Beloselsky had been a familiar figure in diplomatic circles for many years, and much sought after by hospitable hostesses of the national capital who appreciated the value of having an unattached, agreeable bachelor to depend upon should emergencies arise in entertaining. The tragic downfall of imperial Russia and the subsequent severing of diplomatic relations with the United States had occasioned Beloselsky's dismissal by those in political power in Russia.

Beloselsky, after a two-year absence, returned to make Washington his permanent home. His popularity did not diminish by this, as he put it, "temporary" retirement from the diplomatic corps, and he was a welcome guest in the kaleidoscopic life

which makes Washington one of the gayest capitals of the world. The only alteration in Beloselsky's mode of life was changing from an expensive apartment in the northwest to a fashionable boarding house, where he had secured a suite of rooms on the top floor and a degree of privacy not generally accorded in similar establishments.

An hour later Beloselsky was ready and waiting on the sidewalk when Nelson Thorpe drove his powerful touring car up to the curbstone and hailed him.

"Sorry to be late," the newcomer apologized, as the car, under his skillful guidance, glided into Connecticut Avenue and swept down that busy thoroughfare with only slightly diminished speed, "I was detained by a directors' meeting and—eh—" the end of Thorpe's sentence was lost in a fervid oath as a woman driver, regardless of traffic laws, shot her car directly in front of his. Beloselsky, his heart in his throat, was thankful for the hastily applied brakes and the quick shifting of the wheel which just saved them from a bad smash, and scarcely heard his host's next comment. It was only when they had parked in front of the club house that he regained clarity of thought and vision.

"The dear ladies are dangerous," he declared, as he sprang out of the car. "Nowhere is a man safe from their wiles or their eccentricities. I thought,

Thorpe, Mrs. Sinclair-Smith would be our death a moment ago."

"She'd make a good motorist if she didn't object to shifting gears," replied Thorpe. "She claims it makes her nervous."

"Nervous! She is a menace to the community." Beloselsky was still shaken out of his customary blasé attitude. "But, look, who have we here? As I live Mrs. Laughton and Miss Page!" and his voice rose in delighted surprise. "See, across the street—going toward the park," and Thorpe, who had wheeled abruptly around, looked eagerly over toward Franklin Square; the next second his long legs had carried him across Seventeenth Street ahead of his less active companion.

"Mrs. Laughton—how good it is to see you!"

Penelope, walking with bent head, glanced up, startled by Nelson Thorpe's loudly cordial greeting.

"Miss Page, also," taking as he spoke Norma's hand in his. "I had no idea either of you were in town. When did you get back?"

"Last night," responded Norma, as Penelope, mumbling a faint reply, turned to shake hands with Beloselsky. "This is most unexpected, Mr. Thorpe; I understood that you were to be in the Orient another six months."

Thorpe apparently did not hear her, for her com-

ment was brushed aside by a brusque question on his part.

"Why not lunch with me at the Army and Navy Club?" he asked eagerly.

Norma smiled for the first time. The thought of luncheon was not uninviting, considering the small amount of breakfast she had been able to swallow. The long walk around the Speedway had also sharpened her appetite, as well as quieted her nerves to some extent. She had suggested the walk to Penelope following the latter's attack of hysterics that morning, and, while her cousin had proved an uncommunicative, not to say glum, companion, the exercise and fresh air had steadied Penelope also.

"Mrs. Laughton, please say you will both lunch with us," reiterated Thorpe. "Please, I insist."

There was a certain quality in Thorpe's voice which caused Norma to glance at him sharply; a more urgent note than the occasion required. Her glance swept by him to Penelope and, as she caught the latter's heightened color, Norma frowned. Once more her eyes strayed back to Thorpe, and she acknowledged to herself that his travels had improved his good looks. Gone was the characteristic slouch of his tall figure; his shoulders had broadened, and he was tanned from a life of out of doors, while his iron gray hair, in contrast to his dark

eyebrows and mustache, added to his distinguished appearance.

Beloselsky gave Norma no further time for thought. "You must both come," he pleaded with fervor. "We have been starved for your society, lo, these many days," and taking their consent for granted he led the way across the street and through the ladies' entrance to the Army and Navy Club. His gay, inconsequent chatter kept up without a break throughout the service of the luncheon, encouraged by what Norma considered Penelope's almost feverish laughter and her ready replies to Beloselsky's sallies.

Norma, sitting beside her host, grew conscious of his long pauses in the conversation and, at last turning to observe the cause, saw his eyes fixed intently upon Penelope. Just then he caught her glance and a dull red suffused his cheeks.

"I'm wondering," he began, and Norma had to listen attentively to catch what he said in a confidential monotone; "if Mrs. Laughton knows that her husband is in Washington."

Norma controlled her surprise admirably. "Oh, yes," she replied, casually. "Tom is detailed for duty in the Bureau of Navigation."

Thorpe ate his dessert for a second with a preoccupied air.

"Come, Miss Norma," and his voice grew sud-

denly wheedling. "What was the reason Tom Laughton left his wife? Was it jealousy?"

"That is a subject I never discuss." Norma's frigid tone brought an angry gleam in Thorpe's ever-restless eyes. He drank his demi-tasse at a gulp and set down the small cup with little regard for the fragile china.

"Mrs. Laughton doesn't look well," he commented softly. "She shouldn't have returned so—so—" his hesitation was marked—"soon."

"Penelope always does the unexpected," responded Norma, mischief gaining the mastery at sight of his solemnity. "It's one of her chief characteristics."

"I was thinking of the heat in Washington," retorted Thorpe with some vehemence. "September is no month to spend here."

"And yet you returned now?"

"Business," tersely; he paused to take a cigarette from the Filipino servant before adding, "besides, I am acclimated after months in Asia."

"Business," Norma echoed the word with a sigh. "And you resigned from the navy to engage in business; I never will understand why."

"I didn't resign," he hastened to point out. "I was plucked by the retiring board and," with a nonchalance which Norma shrewdly suspected covered far different feelings; "there's an old Scotch

saying—'any bull which tosses you, will toss you into better pastures.'"

"Real estate, this time," chimed in Penelope, who had caught his last remark. "Don't let me forget, Mr. Thorpe, to mail you my Van Vleet apartment lease for your signature; your clerk has waxed quite impatient over my forgetful habits. He was promptness itself, I found when I recently purchased the apartment house you owned in New Hampshire Avenue just back of the Van Vleet."

Thorpe gazed at her spell-bound, both hands resting heavily on the table.

"You purchased that place, *you!*" he exclaimed incredulously.

Penelope's lovely smile showed each pretty dimple. "Yes," quietly. "I had some money lying idle, and my lawyer, Clifford Burton, suggested that the apartment house would be an excellent investment."

Norma, as well as the two men, was gazing blankly at her cousin.

"My goodness, Pen," she said, drawing a long breath. "Do you mean to say you own the building where your mother-in-law has her apartment?"

"Just so," openly amused by Norma's wide-eyed surprise, she added: "Clifford Burton negotiated the deal for me."

"Your name was not mentioned," burst in Thorpe. "Burton took over the place yesterday."

"And he was murdered there last night." Beloselsky, who had followed their rapid conversation with almost painful attention, sat back in his chair. "Singular are the acts of Providence."

"Acts of the devil, you had better say," ejaculated Norma. "Oh, it was a horrible crime! I shan't soon forget the—the venom with which that dagger was thrust into his back. I saw the hand raised and then it came down with frightful force—" she shuddered. "The scene will haunt me always."

Penelope's soft hand stretched across the table brought sympathy in its touch, and Norma clasped it gratefully. "I wish you'd been with me," she exclaimed. "It was so horrible being alone."

"You saw the crime committed but not the criminal," commented Beloselsky, his perfect command of English slightly marred by an unusual rolling emphasis on the letter "r." "What a pity, Miss Page; you might otherwise have saved the police a long search."

"Why long?" questioned Penelope, her eyebrows slightly raised. "We have a most efficient police force in Washington. Come," observing her companions more closely. "I am willing to wager that the murderer of Clifford Burton will be caught within a—"

"Year?" asked Beloselsky, as she paused.

"No—six weeks," and she looked inquiringly at

her companions. "What are you willing to wager?"

Thorpe caught her gaze and held it. "I'll not bet," he replied, "for like you I believe the criminal will be easily detected." Before Penelope could speak, he turned to Beloselsky. "You are more of a sport than I; will you take up Mrs. Laughton's wager?"

"But yes." Beloselsky bowed his head gracefully in her direction. "Are gloves permissible, madam?"

"Surely—I wear five and three-quarters," with an assured smile. It vanished as quickly as it had come, as her gaze shifted from Thorpe's grave countenance to a huge screen which temporarily separated a section of the square dining room, reserved for the use of ladies and their escorts, from that occupied by the regular members of the club. As Penelope continued to stare at the screen, she became conscious of a pair of tragic eyes regarding her through a slit in the screen's fabric. For fully ten seconds their gaze held, then as suddenly as they had appeared the eyes vanished, and Penelope sat back in her chair, her heart pounding against her ribs.

Suddenly she raised her handkerchief and brushed the tiny drops of perspiration from her lip.

"We must be going," she exclaimed, with a slight catch in her breath. "Norma, look at the time, and none of our trunks unpacked!" and covering her

abruptness with light badinage, she made her way to the elevator.

The dining room had filled up in the past hour, and the aisle to the elevator was congested with late arrivals looking for tables. Penelope was in front of her party when they reached the elevator shaft and stood for a moment chatting with some friends who had hailed her upon her approach. As the elevator door opened and several passengers entered the room, she turned, and faced a tall officer. His fine physique was set off by his uniform, and his air of distinction was emphasized by his clear-cut features and handsome eyes, eyes which scanned Penelope coolly, impersonally, and then swept on to her cousin, Norma Page.

"Tom!" The name sprang unbidden to Penelope's dry lips, and she swayed toward him. But with no sign of recognition, her husband stepped past her and, bowing gravely to Norma, passed on down the dining room.

CHAPTER VI

TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD

BOBBY LAUGHTON climbed the steel and stone steps to his grandmother's apartment with ever-diminishing speed. The elevator, as elevators will, had broken down just at the busiest moment when a new tenant was moving in, and the lower hallway was filled with furniture which had to be carried upstairs. In the ensuing confusion, Pat McGuire had little time to devote to so small and insignificant a person as Bobby, and the [illegible]ssed janitor had given impatient answers to his questions as to the whereabouts of Joe, one of the elevator boys. Joe was Bobby's "pal," whenever the latter could evade his grandmother's eye, and Bobby longed for his companionship to while away the hours until Norma should return, as she had promised.

To Bobby's surprise, Doctor Penfield had insisted upon taking him out to luncheon, a luncheon much appreciated by Bobby as it consisted of delicious dishes he was forbidden to eat. Doctor Penfield had been diverted by Bobby's comments and friendly chatter, but there was one topic which the lad, with

a skill beyond his years, carefully avoided. Any allusion to Clifford Burton's murder and his own presence in his grandmother's apartment the night before, brought silence or a polite, "I don't know, sir," if Bobby could not otherwise avoid a direct answer.

Doctor Penfield had left the boy at his home; none the wiser than he had started out. He had thought to beguile him into some careless remark which would aid in establishing a clue to the murder. But the coroner had to admit himself beaten as, with a friendly wave of his hand, he went down the street, leaving Bobby standing in the doorway of the apartment house.

Bobby's footsteps grew longer as he approached his grandmother's apartment. The corridor was empty and no one saw the small figure standing before the door in shrinking hesitation, the key, which he had "borrowed" from his grandmother, balanced in uncertain fingers. It took Bobby fully five minutes to screw up his courage to enter. His heart was beating faster than customary when he finally slid inside the door and closed it softly behind him. The police, before leaving, had pulled down the window shades and the rooms were in semidarkness as Bobby, carefully avoiding the library, hurried into his hall bedroom. The familiar sight of his furniture and the toys tucked under

the bed, somewhat dissipated the feeling of awe and bewilderment which had enveloped him since the discovery of Clifford Burton's dead body in his grandmother's library early that morning.

About an hour later he was contentedly playing with a small model of a destroyer which his father had sent him for an Easter present, when he heard the front door of the apartment open and close. It was a very faint sound and its stealthiness aroused the boy, whose keen hearing was accentuated by his high-strung nerves. No sound of footsteps reached him, and Bobby, leaving his beloved model, wormed his small body noiselessly out of the room and down the hall.

Was that nice Doctor Penfield returning? Or perhaps Norma was trying to surprise him? Bobby chuckled to himself, with boyish love of a practical joke, and, utterly forgetful of the fact that his cousin had no key to the apartment, he prepared to reverse the surprise.

Double portières hung in front of the doorway leading to the library, and Bobby glided noiselessly between them; a precautionary survey of the room showed that it was empty. No further sound reached Bobby and, after waiting several breathless minutes, he slipped back into the hallway and from there into his grandmother's bedroom.

The bedroom was large in size and octagonal in

shape and its furnishings in keeping with the handsome carved four-post bedstead and other family heirlooms. Bobby paid no attention to his surroundings but made directly for a closet halfway down the room. Mrs. Laughton had had shelves put up in one side of the closet, and across from the shelves hung dresses and coats carefully swathed in white sheets. They presented a rather terrifying spectacle in the darkened closet, but Bobby was accustomed to their grotesque appearance and closing the door softly he groped his way among them until his fingers touched the woodwork separating the closet from the library.

In taking the apartment Mrs. Laughton had stipulated that she be permitted to make certain alterations at her expense, and among them had been removing the communicating door between her bedroom closet and the library. She had the carpenters enlarge the size of the doorway and in the space thus provided placed two doors of the early sixteenth century. They were of Italian walnut, so dark that they resembled bronze, and were evidently a family memorial, for the ancestors on each side of the ancient house to whom the doors had belonged, were represented, above and below each coat-of-arms, by carved male and female heads. The carving on the doors, which had no locks, was exceptionally beautiful and Mrs. Laughton's husband,

a wealthy collector of objects of art, had brought them from Spain years before. The work of installing the doors in the apartment had been skillfully done and the old closet doorway completely screened. Few of Mrs. Laughton's visitors realized that the doors were not just "set" into the solid wall.

Once, when locked in the apartment for punishment, Bobby had amused himself by going into his grandmother's closet and upsetting all her belongings. While so occupied his hand had rested heavily against the Spanish doors, and he felt one of the panels give under his weight. His curiosity instantly aroused, Bobby poked and prodded with a perseverance worthy of a better cause, and finally located a small knob, which, when turned, opened the secret panel.

Peering through the small opening, Bobby found that he had an excellent view of the library, and, thrilled to the soul with his discovery, he kept the secret to himself. It had beguiled many a tedious hour when locked in the closet on account of some misdemeanor. His active imagination peopled the dark space with Captain Kidd and his followers and he pictured himself their prisoner and the secret panel his only means of communication with the outer world. Bobby had discovered that he could peer into the library without danger

of being seen by its occupants as, through the dexterity of the maker of the doors in the early sixteenth century, the peep-holes were the natural eyes of one of the carved heads.

From his vantage point behind the screen, Bobby, on occasions had peppered Mrs. Laughton's French maid with bird shot until that worthy was induced to enter the library only under threat of instant dismissal. She was a believer in the supernatural as well as in the benefit of a well-applied switch, and while she supplied Bobby with the latter at his grandmother's behest, he did his best to cultivate her belief in ghosts, ably assisted by Joe, the elevator boy. "Mam'selle Celeste," as the other servants called her, had little love for children, and her dislike of Bobby was intensified by his mischievous spirit which was not always suppressed by his surroundings.

Bobby had been in the closet for nearly five minutes when he caught a movement of the portières. With every sense alert, he waited, blow pipe in one hand and bird shot in the other. His eyes widened as a hand appeared cautiously and parted the portières.

Bobby caught his breath—it was a large hand of a curious pinkish tint, and the cuff was certainly not on a woman's wrist. Suddenly the hand was replaced by a face, and Bobby, at sight of the

aquiline features and swarthy complexion, drew back from the panel in sheer panic. His Cousin Norma had deceived him and sent word to Señor Lopez in time to bring him to Washington that afternoon.

Bobby's freckles showed up plainly against his pallor. Would he have to go with Señor Lopez? The question brought a shiver in its train; slowly his expression altered, and the small childish mouth closed tightly. On all fours Bobby crept to the closet door and, getting on his knees, felt about until his fingers found the bolt, which in former days had been used by other tenants to lock the closet off from the bedroom and allow access into it only from the library. Bobby slipped the bolt into place and returned to his post by the secret panel.

A hasty glance into the library showed that it was empty and Bobby's hopes rose. Perhaps Señor Lopez had concluded that no one was in the apartment and had left. But Bobby's rejoicings were short-lived.

A slight movement to his right caused him to turn his head and glance in that direction—Señor Lopez, stripped of his coat, was lying on his stomach and, in that position, appeared to the excited boy to glide across the floor toward him.

Bobby's heart almost stopped beating. Had his tutor discovered his whereabouts? Lopez paused directly under the secret panel and lay still for what

seemed an interminable minute to Bobby, crouching on the other side of the screen. Raising himself upward very cautiously, the boy peered down at Lopez. He was still stretched at full length on the floor, but what occupied his attention was just beyond Bobby's line of vision.

Suddenly the man moved as if to get up, and Bobby closed the panel. Fully five minutes went by before Bobby again peered into the library. Lopez had crossed the room and stood near one of the bookcases which reached from the floor to the ceiling. With head thrown well back, he scanned the different shelves, sometimes running his hands over the books and withdrawing one or two, only to replace them with a grunt, indicative of disappointment. The next article of furniture to claim his scrutiny was the large mahogany table standing in the window. With eyes but narrow slits under his heavy brows, one of which was disfigured by a sinister scar, Lopez regarded the table. The window curtains were still drawn and, while a fair amount of afternoon light shone through the yellow Holland shades, the objects in the room were easily discernible to the watching boy, it was not until Lopez leaned forward and switched on the electric lamp that Bobby got a comprehensive view of his hand. Under its direct rays Bobby saw that Lopez was wearing a rubber glove. He had seen Celeste,

the French maid, wear similar gloves too often to be mistaken in their appearance. Celeste's pride in her small, shapely hands had prompted her to protect them from rough work, such as dusting and blacking boots, and Bobby had received severe punishment for "borrowing" her rubber gloves to play with.

Lopez stared at the table long and intently, stooping this way and that to get a better view of its polished surface and desk ornaments. Something must have attracted him for, without warning, he advanced toward the screen, and Bobby instinctively ducked away from the open panel. But the boy's alarm was unnecessary—Lopez's gaze did not stray from the handsome Bokhara rugs which covered the hardwood floor. His padded footfall was almost soundless as he passed like an evil shadow from the library.

Bobby sat back with a shiver and tried to conquer his ever-growing fear of discovery. If the construction of the panel made him invisible in the past, surely his presence had gone undetected? Suppose, however, Lopez had been told that he was in the apartment and would wait for him to come out from his concealment? The thought was not reassuring. Bobby sat taut by the open panel, almost afraid to breathe as he listened for the slightest noise, hoping Lopez would grow tired of waiting

and depart. Time passed on leaden feet, and the boy's heart sank with dread. Once that summer his grandmother's chauffeur, inspired by Lopez, or so the boy thought, had whipped him unmercifully. Bobby's lips grew dry at the recollection, and his small body squirmed to avoid an imaginary whip lash. No, he must stay where he was until Cousin Norma returned; she would protect him from Lopez—the man would not dare strike him in her presence. But, oh, why didn't she come? Bobby would have given much if the Terry clock on the high mantel across from where he crouched had been wound up—he could then have known how fast the dragging hours were really going. He crawled over to the door and listened at the keyhole, hoping to detect some noise which would guide him as to Lopez's whereabouts, but no sound rewarded his efforts. In despair, he crouched again by the open panel. The close, stuffy air in the closet combined with the heat made him drowsy—he had been hours without sleep the night before. Bobby strove to throw off the lethargy which slowly numbed his senses; his head sank forward and his hand, resting on the round knob of wood, inadvertently turned it—and the panel closed noiselessly on the sleeping boy.

Señor Lopez had completed an exhaustive search of the dining room, kitchen, and pantry and had

reached Bobby's bedroom when his wrist watch showed him that it was after four o'clock. Lopez frowned as he gazed at the toys scattered about the room and last at the model of the destroyer which occupied the place of honor in front of the window. The model was complete in every detail and the pride and joy of Bobby's heart. Lopez's fingers itched to throw it on the floor and stamp it out of shape. Conquering his ungovernable temper, he stood for a moment in deep thought as he twirled Bobby's cap in his fingers. He flung it down on the bed and stepped into the hall in time to hear a door open in the direction of the kitchen and the sound of lowered voices. Lopez flattened himself against the wall and slipped noiselessly down the winding hall toward the front door as the voices came nearer, and two men walked through the apartment, stopping first in the dining room.

"Everything locked up here," announced Detective Doyle. "Come into the library, Pat," and the janitor, slipping his pass key into his pocket followed his companion from one room to another.

"What did you want to tell me, Jim," he asked, after assisting the detective in examining the locks of windows and doors. "An' why did ye not want to speak forninst the leftenant, beyond?"

"Sure, an' I didn't want to spill the beans," explained Doyle. "It will be known at headquarters

quick enough, an' the boys'll be as thick as flies around here. Man, Sir Gilbert Montagu, the nephew of him who was murdered last night in these rooms, has offered a reward of ten thousand dollars for the arrest of the criminal; leastways, so he told me, an' there's no reason why you an' me can't cop the money."

The janitor's eyes brightened, and a look of greed crept into them. He drew a long breath. "So that's why you wanted me to bring ye up quiet like, through the service entrance," he nodded in understanding. "Look about you careful, Jim; the murderin' divil must a-left some clue."

Doyle's left eye closed and unclosed in a significant wink. "Rest easy," he said. "I'm wise to a thing or two that nobody but me is suspectin'. I just wanted to be sure that everything was as I left it." They had paused for a moment in Mrs. Laughton's bedroom, and Doyle looked carefully in every direction.

"But why is the police leavin' the apartment open like?" objected McGuire. "Sure, I thought they'd lock it up and station a guard about it."

Doyle smiled derisively. "We have a better way," he explained. "Ye know the old sayin'—'a dog returns to his vomit'; an' just so sure does a murderer return to the scene of his crime—when he's given a chance. An' take it from me, Pat, I'll see

he gets his chance. Why, man, don't shake your head at me; every person entering this apartment is under surveillance." He drew closer to the janitor. "There's the boy, Bobby."

"Well, what of him?" demanded McGuire sourly as Doyle paused.

"He's the milk in the cocoanut." The detective smiled at McGuire's bewilderment. "Why, man, can't you see; Bobby, who was in this apartment last night, *must* know who killed Cliff Burton."

"He said he didn't."

"Of course!" Doyle snapped his fingers derisively. "When Inspector Mitchell or Coroner Penfield comes 'round the boy's mum, but s'pose you talk to him," he paused dramatically. "Bobby ain't suspecting you."

"An' 'most likely he'll let drop some clue." At last, enlightened as to his companion's meaning, McQuire slapped his thigh delightedly. "Sure, I'll worm it out of Bobby, never fear," his mouth tightened ominously. "You're right, Doyle; there's our chance to cop the reward."

"Just so," agreed his companion. "You get the boy to stick around your shack."

"'Twon't be hard," broke in the janitor, his cupidity fully awakened. "Bobby hates his grandma, and I'll coax him out beyond."

"Fine!" Doyle interrupted, opening and closing

his powerful hand. "That money is as good as ours if ye do as I say."

"Sure, just try me"—McGuire leaned over and shook hands with Doyle and the latter smiled, well satisfied.

"Come on," he said; "I've searched this apartment five different times already, an' everything but the furniture is under lock an' key, an' I've got 'em on this bunch—" dangling a key ring in the air.

McGuire halted and his gaze once more swept the bedroom, lighting at last on the closed closet door.

"Ye might as well add this key to your bunch," he said.

Inside the closet, Bobby Laughton awoke in time to hear the key turn in the outer lock of the closet door, and the faint sound of retreating footsteps. The boy brushed his hot, tired eyes with a grimy fist. One thought uppermost in his confused state of mind—shut up in the closet he would be Señor Lopez's prisoner if he were found there.

Bobby commenced, cautiously, to feel the walls of the closet and the panels of the door, in the endeavor to find a means of escape.

CHAPTER VII

EAVESDROPPERS

SIR GILBERT MONTAGU lit his twentieth cigarette within the hour and slipping his monocle in his eye gazed in growing concern at Commander Thomas Laughton. Would the latter never weary of pacing back and forth before the telephone? As the silence lengthened and the footsteps, with quarter-deck precision, advanced and wheeled, wheeled and advanced, the Englishman's mind reverted to the days before the outbreak of the World War when, as attachés of their respective countries they had waited in Petrograd—then St. Petersburg—for the imperial mandate calling a million men to arms. Much water had run under the bridge since then, and destiny had brought them together once more. What rôle had destiny cast for them this time?

Montagu turned his troubled eyes from his silent companion to his ash tray, and laid down his cigarette. He opened his lips and closed them, his remonstrance unspoken, as the commander crossed the room with long, nervous strides and dropped down in the nearest chair.

"I never saw such service!" he exploded, his deep voice betraying his pent-up wrath. "What if the storm the other night did blow down a few poles; the telephone company ought to have replaced the wires by now. What do you advise, Gilbert? Is it best to motor up to Blue Ridge Summit and get my mother? This news of your uncle's murder in her apartment is bound to upset her, and her constitution—"

"Is tolerably strong," replied Montagu, dryly. "I've seen your mother lately, Tom, and she was apparently in robust health."

"Her letters said she was suffering from her old heart complaint." Laughton turned harassed eyes toward his friend. "I know she's a bit peculiar and all that, but she's my mother—and I ought to be there to break the news to her."

Montagu paused to toss a box of matches to Laughton as the latter drew out his pipe and filled it. "A glance at the newspapers probably gave her the information," he said after a pause. "Then there's Bobby—"

"What about Bobby?" At the mention of his son's name, Laughton's stern expression softened, and his eyes brightened. "The boy is well, strong—isn't he?"

"Oh, yes, in splendid health."

"Good!" In his relief Laughton interrupted his

friend. "I am anxious to see the little shaver, Gilbert; I reckon I'll motor up there at once."

"You may miss your mother if you do," broke in Montagu, in his turn. "Something tells me she is on her way here." He hesitated and eyed Laughton a trifle anxiously. "Bobby is already in Washington."

Laughton sprang to his feet. "You don't mean it? Where?" he demanded, in one breath; then spoke more slowly, his face darkening. "Not—not with his mother?"

"No, oh, no!" Montagu paused and glanced at the afternoon newspaper lying across his lap. It had been handed to him half an hour before, and while he had absorbed the account of the murder of his uncle, Commander Laughton had waved aside the proffered sheet and centered his attention on the telephone and his efforts to get a clear line to Blue Ridge Summit. "This newspaper features Bobby."

"Features him?" echoed Laughton, reseating himself. "What d'ye mean? What does the paper know about Bobby?"

"He was in your mother's apartment last night."

Slowly Laughton took in the sense of what his friend was saying.

"In mother's apartment," he repeated, his eyes wide with astonishment. "In heaven's name, what was he doing there?"

Montagu moved uneasily. "Bobby told the police that he had come there to meet you," he blurted out.

Tom Laughton was again on his feet, his eyes half-starting from his head.

"How in the name of God did Bobby know I was—" his words died in his throat as Montagu held up an imperative hand.

"S-s-sh!" he warned, then more loudly: "Is that you, Rufino?"

The man who responded to his hail moved away from the door near which he had paused and advanced further into the sitting room. As he came nearer, Laughton saw that it was not the Englishman's valet, but a stranger to him whom Montagu eyed with disfavor.

"Ah, Inspector," Montagu strove to throw cordiality into both voice and manner. "I understood you would not get here until later. Tom," with a wave of his hand, "let me introduce Inspector Mitchell—Commander Laughton."

The naval officer acknowledged the introduction with a civil inclination of his head, while Mitchell bowed gravely and without waiting to be asked, selected a chair and sat down. He eyed the two men in front of him inquisitively for a minute and glanced about the pleasant sitting room.

"You've led me quite a chase, Commander," he

began. "Quite a chase, sir"; with more emphasis, as Laughton lighted his pipe with deliberation. The action effectually screened the lower half of his face, but Mitchell was aware of the keen scrutiny he was being subjected to, and his own gaze did not shift before Laughton's cold stare.

"Sorry, I was not aware that you cared to see me," the latter replied, between puffs at his pipe. "I have been here all day, except when lunching at the club."

Mitchell inspected him in silence for a minute, before turning to Montagu. "This is your apartment, is it not, Sir Gilbert?"

Montagu nodded toward his friend. "We have taken it together," he explained. "Will you have a cigarette, Inspector?"

But Mitchell declined with a wave of his hand. "You'd have saved both time and trouble had you mentioned that fact this morning," he grumbled. He glanced upward at Laughton, who had remained standing. "I understood you were to live with your mother, Commander."

"You were misinformed," coldly. "My son makes his home with her. Learning that Sir Gilbert Montagu was looking for winter quarters, I suggested that we live together, temporarily, at least; and," with a sudden whimsical smile which showed his fine white teeth, "here we are at the Van Vleet apartment."

"It's a rather nice place," agreed Montagu, with more energy than he had previously evinced. "Got the flat at a bargain—furniture and all."

"Congratulations," the inspector bowed ironically. "But why, Sir Gilbert, did you select this particular locality?"

"Because Commander Laughton would like to be near his mother."

"And his wife?"

The words had hardly left Inspector Mitchell's lips before Laughton was by his side, his eyes blazing and his fists clenched.

"You—cur!" Cold fury lent emphasis to the word. "Get out of this apartment," and Mitchell retreated with such haste that in rising he knocked over his chair. With the apartment door safely closed behind him, the inspector smiled again.

"Drew blood," he muttered, and sought the office on the first floor. The clerk in charge was chary of answering questions, but a glimpse of Mitchell's police badge wrought its customary change.

"Sir Gilbert Montagu took over apartment 603 several days ago," he said. "Sublet it from a diplomat who was transferred unexpectedly. Commander Laughton got here about seven o'clock this morning; I recollect the exact time," as Mitchell looked across at the clock. "I had just relieved the night clerk, and Commander Laughton had no key to the apart-

ment, and Jim let him in with the office pass key."

"Where was Sir Gilbert?"

"Don't know." The clerk turned away to answer a query as to a vacant apartment, and it was some minutes before he had time to devote to Mitchell, who was eying with interest the handsome foyer. The apartment house was a fine type of modern architecture, and no expense had been spared to make it meet the requirements of the ultra-smart set.

"Now sir," the clerk was at his elbow, having come outside his office. "Step this way," and Mitchell walked down the broad corridor toward the entrance to the café. Halfway there, however, the clerk paused and pointed to an alcove, the portières of which were partly drawn. There was no one in the corridor, and the clerk's stiff manner thawed.

"Are you investigating the murder next door?" he asked eagerly, and Mitchell nodded in silent assent, touching his finger to his lips a second later.

"I understand, mum's the word," the clerk looked hastily down the corridor and drew closer to Mitchell. "There's something, not much," striving to qualify his excited manner—to be even an atom in what promised to be a *cause célèbre* was sending a thrill up and down the clerk's spine. "I was coming along this corridor yesterday about tea time, leastways I had just finished supper, when I heard voices coming from that alcove. The portières

weren't drawn, and I glanced at the two men sitting there and recognized Sir Gilbert Montagu and his uncle—"

"Ah, then you knew Mr. Clifford Burton?" broke in Mitchell.

"Sure," impatiently. "He was a big shareholder in this hotel company. But that wasn't what brought him here yesterday afternoon."

"No?" The inspector's quizzical smile provoked the clerk and he instinctively raised his voice to emphasize his positive statements.

"He came to see his nephew and make him give up his apartment here."

Mitchell was listening now with undivided attention to the clerk and failed to catch a soft sigh or observe a slight movement of the portières in front of the alcove.

"What reason did Mr. Burton give for making such a request?" he asked eagerly.

"I didn't catch all their talk; just snatches," admitted the other. "But Mr. Burton said he wasn't going to be spied on, and Sir Gilbert could clear out at once."

Mitchell stared at his companion. "Clifford Burton did not live here, did he?"

"No, sir." The clerk cleared his throat nervously. "Just before I got out of earshot, sir, I heard Sir Gilbert say, 'If you compromise her, you'll be

killed.'" The clerk paused dramatically. "What do you make of that, Mr. Inspector?"

Mitchell declined to commit himself. "It's mysterious," he admitted, and covered up his lack of a direct answer by adding, "You'll be doing us a great favor if you keep an eye on Sir Gilbert and his companion, Commander Laughton"; observing a look of doubt cross the man's face, Mitchell went on. "They'll never suspect you—you are too clever for that," with flattering emphasis. "What is your name?"

"Harris, sir; John Harris."

"Well, Harris, here is my card; should any unusual happenings come under your observation, I'll be greatly obliged if you will notify me," and Mitchell, turning, walked away in the opposite direction as Harris went back to his office, and by a fraction of a minute missed Norma Page as she sped down the corridor to meet her cousin, Penelope Laughton.

Inspector Mitchell's departure from Montagu's apartment about twenty minutes earlier had been followed by tense silence, broken finally by Tom Laughton.

"Has my wife an apartment in this building?" he inquired.

"Yes." Montagu picked up the chair Mitchell had knocked over in his hasty exit; then, carefully avoid-

ing his friend's eye, he added. "It's number 615 and around the corridor from us."

"Same floor?" questioned Laughton, and Montagu nodded. Laughton moved over to a window and stood looking out, his face completely hidden from his companion's inquiring gaze.

Montagu stood the silence for about five minutes and then spoke with some show of irritation.

"See here, old dear," he began. "You were asleep when I got in from taking Uncle Cliff's body to the undertakers, and I did not awaken you. You slipped out to the club when I wasn't here, and since you've been back, you have been as uncommunicative as a clam."

Laughton turned round. "Shall I sing or dance a jig?" he asked, then getting a better look at Montagu's solemn countenance, he added more gently, "Sorry, Gilbert; I did not mean to be unsociable. The news of your uncle's murder in my mother's apartment has—has—"

"That's just it," broke in Montagu eagerly. "You've shut me up whenever I've said anything about it. Now, you've got to know—" he stopped abruptly, and Tom Laughton looked at him inquiringly.

"Know what?" he asked as the silence lengthened.

"Know more details about the murder." Montagu rose, and, crossing the room, thrust the *Evening Star*

into Laughton's hand. "Here, read what the *Star* says."

Laughton spread the newspaper before him and, column by column, read the reporter's account of the tragedy. Surmise as well as facts were woven into the article which, spread under scare headlines, occupied the front page of the paper.

"A spectacular crime," it ran in part, "was committed between midnight and two o'clock this morning when Clifford Burton was stabbed to death in the apartment of Mrs. Rutherford Laughton.

"The murder is veiled in mystery. How Mr. Burton entered the apartment, closed for the summer months; why he was there, and who killed him, are the questions exercising the minds of police headquarters and the detective bureau.

"Mr. Burton was a well-known lawyer of Washington, a man of wealth, and a member of the Racquet, Metropolitan, and Chevy Chase Clubs. He was also a large stockholder in the Metropolis Bank, and prominently identified with numerous business enterprises.

"Mr. Burton is survived by Sir Gilbert Montagu, a nephew, the only son of his sister, whose marriage to Lord Montagu was a fashionable event of three decades ago. Sir Gilbert Montagu has been attached to the British Embassy since April last. Upon his arrival, he made his home with his late uncle in

Hillyer Place, but two days ago took possession of a bachelor apartment in the Van Vleet.

"Sir Gilbert, unnerved by the shocking death of his uncle, has so far denied himself to interviewers.

"Mrs. Rutherford Laughton is prominent socially. From New York originally, she has made Washington her home for a number of years. Her son, Commander Thomas Laughton, U. S. Navy, was stationed here some time ago, and has many friends in the national capital. He is at present on his way to Washington, after service with the Asiatic fleet.

"Mrs. Laughton closed her apartment the last of June and opened her cottage at Blue Ridge Summit where she still is. All attempts to reach her by telephone have failed owing to a heavy storm in that vicinity which blew down the telephone wires.

"The crime was discovered by Miss Norma Page, a cousin of Mrs. Thomas Laughton, who is occupying an apartment at the Van Vleet. The latter's apartment overlooked that of Mrs. Laughton, her mother-in-law, and Miss Page saw the murder committed, but was unable to supply the police with any clews as to the identity of the criminal.

"The police are at a loss to ascribe a motive for the crime. Inspector Mitchell, of the central office, is in charge of the investigation, and he has promised some interesting developments later.

"A singular feature of the murder of Mr. Bur-

ton was the presence, in the apartment, of Mrs. Laughton's twelve-year-old grandson, Bobby Laughton. Through him the police hope to trace—"

The newspaper slipped through Tom Laughton's fingers. With face grown gray and haggard, he reached over and picked up his service cap.

"Where are you going?" demanded Montagu as Laughton strode past him.

"To find Bobby." The apartment door slammed shut, and Montagu was left staring into vacancy.

CHAPTER VIII

COMPLICATIONS

PAT McGUIRE looked at the taxicab tearing down the street and then at the pretty woman before him.

"Indade, Celeste, an' where did ye spring from?" he asked. "An' where be the madam?"

Celeste showed each pretty dimple in her welcoming smile as she dropped him a quaint curtsy. *"Bon jour,* M'sieur Pat," she exclaimed. "An' how is m'sieur? Well, after ze summaire heat?"

"Well as kin be expected," grumbled McGuire; "considerin' all I have to do, an' these worthless boys disappointin' me ivery so often. Be ye wantin' to ride up?"

"But yes," and Celeste stepped promptly inside the building and into the elevator, the door of which was open. She had not waited to pick up the luggage which the taxi-driver had deposited on the steps, and when McGuire, his hands fully engaged with two suit cases, a hat box, and three large paper boxes, reached her, he found her powdering her nose in front of the small mirror.

"Ye haven't answered me question," he pointed

out, starting the elevator upward. "Where'd ye leave old Mrs. Laughton?"

"She have stop at the Navy Department to ask for news of her son." Celeste closed her vanity box and readjusted her veil. "An' then she go to ze police office to ask for zat little devil, Bobby, who haf run away."

"Bobby's here." McGuire stopped the elevator at the top floor. "Leastways he was hangin' 'round here arskin' for Joe 'bout two or more hours ago—I furgits the exact time. Can ye git into the apartment?" His hand sought his pass key as he spoke.

"I haf my own key." Celeste was busy fitting it into the lock. "I tol' madame zat Bobby would be here, for did he not, wiz great cunning, take madame's key? He is one sly boy, m'sieur; an' ze poor madame, she suffer much anxiety. We sleep not much las' night, see—" and she touched the circles under her eyes.

McGuire looked admiringly straight into her snapping black eyes. "Gee, gal, but ye are purty," he blurted out, and flushed crimson. To cover his embarrassment, he added hastily, "Didn't none o' us git much sleep las' night. Ye've heard tell of the murder of Mr. Burton in this here apartment?"

Celeste staggered back against the wall. "What is zat you say?" she stammered. "M'sieur Burton killed in zis apartment? *Non, non, c'est impossible!*"

"But it is so!" declared McGuire with relish, enjoying the sensation he was creating, and before Celeste had time to gather her breath, he gave her a graphic account of the discovery of the murder. "Sure I thought Mrs. Laughton would have heard tell of it before now," he ended. "I'm sorry I broke it to ye so sudden like."

Celeste's high color had vanished. She passed one nervous hand over her white cheeks and drew a long breath.

"*C'est terrible!*" she muttered, then in a louder tone. "Come into ze dining room, M'sieur Pat; I sink I know—" she did not complete her sentence; instead she hurried along the hall and, not waiting to see if the janitor was following, entered the dining room and paused in front of the sideboard.

Making sure that the door to the apartment was securely closed, McGuire stopped only long enough to pile the suit cases in a corner of the hall and entered the dining room in time to see Celeste produce a decanter and two glasses.

"Only sherry for ze cooking, *mon brave*," she explained. "Come, have a glass with me."

McGuire needed no second invitation. He smacked his lips as he put down the empty glass.

"It's dum good stuff," he admitted, and reaching over, helped himself from the decanter, and then gave more to Celeste. "What do ye s'pose brought

Cliff Burton to this apartment last night? Aw, give a guess—" as Celeste shook her head.

"It is hard to say, M'sieur Pat," she shook her bewildered head. "Perhaps love—" with a coquettish glance into his infatuated eyes, "perhaps hate—"

"Tush! I don't think much o' your suggestions," snapped McGuire. "The apartment was empty, except for that consarned boy. 'Twarn't no love for Bobby brought ol' Burton here, nor hate neither; now if it had been his mother—" he snickered as Celeste refilled his glass and not waiting to see if she replenished her own, emptied it at a gulp. "Are ye afraid to stay here by yourself?"

Celeste shook her head. "Madame Laughton will be here shortly; but you, M'sieur Pat—suppose the elevator, he ring?"

McGuire made a wry face. "I'd best be gettin' back," he admitted. "Ef ye are scared, jus' ring the house 'phone."

"An' you will come queek, *n'est-ce pas?*" Her glance warmed his heart and he clumsily kissed her hand before she pulled it away. "Do not go too far from Celeste, I will call." She slipped her arm through his and walking down the hallway opened the door for him. The loud and incessant ringing of the elevator bell interrupted his leave taking, and with a muttered curse on the impatience of human

nature in general and some tenants in particular, McGuire went back to his work.

Celeste listened to the descending elevator for a brief second, then retreated inside the apartment and closed the door. As she passed the dining room on her way to the small bedroom and bath back of the kitchen, which constituted her living quarters, she spied the decanter and soiled glasses. It took but an instant to replace them on a shelf in the sideboard, and then Celeste hurried into her bedroom. When she emerged a few minutes later, she was without her hat and her hair was neatly arranged under a net.

A touch of rouge covered Celeste's unusual pallor, and the lip stick, but poorly applied, had made a crimson streak across her face. Her shadow dimly seen in the long pier glass hanging in the hall near the entrance to the library caused her to start violently and press one hand over her rapidly beating heart. She laughed shakily at discovering the cause of her fright and moved on, only to halt abruptly at the library door. Twice she strove to pass over the threshold, but she could not muster up her courage, and so hurried on into Mrs. Laughton's bedroom.

It was much lighter in the bedroom, and Celeste tried to banish thoughts of Pat McGuire's all too realistic description of Burton's dead body lying across the table in the library. She looked doubtfully at the big French bed, with its enveloping

sheets which protected pillows and mattress from dust, and at the other pieces of furniture in their summer garb. With an effort she awoke from her unpleasant reflections. There was much work to be done before Mrs. Laughton reached there.

Celeste went over to the closet door and turned the knob. It failed to open and her hand sought the key in the lock. It was gone. With a perplexed frown she stood in thought for a moment, then darted from the bedroom; when she returned after a trifling delay she held a key in her hand. Inserting it in the closet door, she turned the lock just as steel fingers gripped her shoulder.

Celeste's scream was smothered in the palm of a large hand clapped across her mouth, and she was dragged backward.

"Keep quiet!" ordered a stern voice in her ear, and looking up Celeste recognized Señor Lopez.

"You!" Celeste wrenched herself free from his detaining clasp. *"Mon Dieu!"*

"Oui, ma belle!" Lopez lapsed again into English. "Sorry to startle you, but I could not forbear—congratulations."

Wide-eyed she stared at him. "Congratulations?" she faltered.

"On your acting." His chill sinister smile sent her trembling fingers to her shoulder, still tingling from his powerful grip.

"I do not get m'sieur's meaning."

"No?" The interrogation held sneering skepticism, but Celeste had had a second to pull herself together, and the shock of his unexpected presence was wearing off.

"M'sieur is pleased to be funny," she retorted with some of her old spirit. "And what is m'sieur doing in zis so-called 'empty' apartment?"

"The same errand that brought you to Washington brought me, also," he responded, his manner more ingratiating. "But you, Celeste," he paused, "come too late."

Her hands opened and closed spasmodically.

"You—you—" her voice was rough with emotion, "*cochon*!"

"Spare your epithets," with stern emphasis. "Suppose the police—"

A loud ring of the bell followed by an imperative knock on the front door of the apartment interrupted him. A slight scream escaped Celeste, and her expression changed to one of horrified alarm.

"Run, m'sieur, run!" she gasped. "Zey must not find you here."

But Lopez, disregarding her frantic motions toward the back hall, quietly approached the library.

"What have I to fear?" he asked; his gaze held hers in a fascinated stare. "Answer the door, Celeste."

She started down the hall to obey him, then drew back. "Suppose it is M'sieur Pat, the janitor?"

Lopez's swarthy lips parted in a grin. "I complicate your love affairs, is it not?" he shrugged his shoulders. "Well, tell the estimable gentleman, that I have come," his glance caused her to shrink away, "for Bobby."

In old Mrs. Laughton's bedroom, vacated a moment before by Lopez and Celeste, the closet door opened cautiously, then closed as silently. Fear giving him wings, Bobby was but a vanishing shadow as he sped to the service elevator in the pantry. A glance showed him that the elevator was resting at the floor above; the next instant, with the agility of a sailor the boy was swarming down the center rope, hand over hand on his way to the basement. It was not the first time he had taken that mode of exit.

Celeste was still standing in indecision with her hand on the knob of the front door when the knock sounded again with even more insistence. The maid cast a hunted look behind her; Lopez had stopped at the library door and was regarding her intently with finger pointed toward the front door.

Celeste obeyed the silent command in nervous haste. At sight of a strange man in uniform before her, she started to slam the door in his face, but his foot blocked her efforts.

"Is Mrs. Laughton here?" he asked, scanning the French maid, and added more forcefully— "My mother."

Celeste stared at him aghast. In her fright she had mistaken him for a policeman, but a closer look showed her the blue uniform and gold braid of a commander in the United States Navy.

"*Bon jour,* m'sieur," she exclaimed, and Laughton wondered at her excessive cordiality. "Madame, your mother, will be here in but a minute; she paused at the Navy Department to inquire for news of you. This way, m'sieur," and she ushered him into the library. "M'sieur Lopez awaits madame, also."

Laughton looked at the man who rose at his entrance and advancing a few steps, bowed profoundly.

"Señor Lopez?" he asked questioningly. "My son's tutor?"

"Yes, Commander Laughton," and again Lopez bowed.

Laughton stepped forward and held out his hand. "My mother has mentioned you very often in her letters," he said, "and also Celeste," nodding toward the maid, who waited in the background. "I recognize you both from her description. I did not expect to see either of you here, or to learn that my mother was in the city. I came," his voice deepened, "to find my son."

"Bobby's truancy has brought us all to Washington," responded Lopez easily. "Celeste has more definite news of him from the janitor."

"*Oui,* m'sieur," broke in Celeste. "Bobby was below stairs 'bout two, tree hours ago lookin' for zat—zat," hunting for a word, "miserable black boy who run the elevator."

"So Bobby is not in the apartment?" Laughton's handsome face betrayed his disappointment to the keen eyes watching him covertly, although he had schooled himself to show no emotion.

"But he will return for suppair, if not before, m'sieur," declared Celeste, shrewdly. "Bobby has always a big appetite and is nevair late when hungry."

"Celeste is right," added Lopez. "Had you better not sit down, sir." He stopped with his hand on a chair. "Perhaps not in this room—" with a gesture entirely Latin.

"And why not?" The question came swiftly from Laughton.

"Mr. Clifford Burton was murdered here last night, and his body found on that table this morning," explained Lopez. "My thought was that you might find the room—eh—gruesome."

Laughton's expression denoted deep interest, tinged with repugnance.

"A tragic affair," he agreed, looking about. "I

wish that it had occurred elsewhere than in my mother's apartment."

Lopez followed his glance about the room, then let his eyes rest full upon Laughton; neither man noticed that Celeste had slipped into the hall to answer a faint knock on the front door, which was repeated several times at stated intervals before she reached there.

"You were acquainted with Mr. Burton?" asked Lopez, and at the question, casually put, Laughton eyed his companion somewhat keenly.

"Oh, yes," he answered. "But come, Lopez, you must know Bobby's favorite haunts; can you not suggest some place where we may find him?"

Lopez stroked his chin in thought. "His mother's apartment," he suggested suavely, with a slight wave of his hand in the direction of the window, "across the way."

Laughton's eyes narrowed; otherwise his expression did not change.

"In that case, you might go over there and fetch him back," he suggested. "I will wait here."

With a bow Lopez left him, but before he could reach the hall the doorway was blocked.

"Mrs. Laughton!" he exclaimed, and bowed again. Lopez doubted if she saw him; instead her eyes were fixed upon her son, and with arms outstretched she flung herself into Laughton's embrace with a fervor

which secretly astonished him. Once in the long ago, when a little boy, he had chided his mother because she showed so little feeling at the death of his father. Her answer had always lingered in his memory.

"I do not lack affection," she had retorted; "I have simply learned to control my emotions."

Laughton patted his mother clumsily on the back with all the Anglo-Saxon's dislike of anything approaching a scene.

"There, mother, there," he said. "I should have prepared you for my arrival—I am truly sorry to upset you this way."

Mrs. Laughton stroked his cheek. "It is really you," she murmured. "Oh, Tom, I am so glad to see you, and just at this time," she paused to wipe away a tear with a dry handkerchief. "I am sorry, dear, to appear so—so unnerved; but this dreadful, dreadful murder in this room—" she put up her hand to shade her eyes. "Come into my bedroom, Tom, and talk to me there. Ah," becoming aware of Lopez standing, hat in hand in the hall. "Señor Lopez, excuse me, I did not see you."

"Certainly, Mrs. Laughton." Lopez's deferential manner was soothing to her frayed nerves. "Is there anything I can do for you before I leave to look for Bobby?"

Mrs. Laughton's expression hardened. "That

dreadful boy!" she moaned. "Tom, he has been such a torment!"

Laughton's lips tightened with displeasure. "You will not be bothered with him after to-night," he said quietly. "I will remain with my mother until you return, Lopez," and his tone of dismissal was unmistakable. With another bow, which embraced even Celeste, the tutor left the apartment as Mrs. Laughton led her son into her bedroom.

She chatted to him in disjointed sentences, while Celeste, with deft fingers, removed her hat and light traveling coat.

"Do look in my bag for my salts, Tom," she directed. "My headache is frightful—just dump the things on the bed. Here, Celeste, see what is the matter with that hairpin—it is sticking directly into me."

Celeste stood behind her as she stood facing her dressing table and strove to remove the ravages of travel and arrange her hair in the most becoming style. Mrs. Laughton was a handsome woman of perhaps sixty years, with slightly gray hair and a fine pair of dark eyes. The family resemblance between mother and son was slight; Laughton had inherited his height and coloring, as well as his disposition, from his father.

Laughton's efforts to find his mother's bottle of smelling salts not proving successful, he had followed

her suggestion and dumped the bag's contents on the bed. As he sought in the heterogeneous mass of handkerchiefs, gloves, sewing kit, and scissors, his hand touched an electric torch. He picked up the latter and turned its rays into the interior of the bag just at the moment that Celeste walked over to the closet, where Bobby had been hiding, to put away Mrs. Laughton's hat and coat.

The next instant she had staggered backward into the room, her face like parchment, and collapsed into the nearest chair.

"M'sieur, m'sieur," she gasped. "Help—the face in the closet!"

Lighted torch in hand, Laughton darted into the closet as his mother ran to the servant's side. She was chafing the girl's cold and nerveless hands when Laughton joined them.

"What ails you, Celeste?" he demanded sharply. "The closet is empty."

CHAPTER IX

FENCING

THE trim maid relieved Señor Lopez of his hat and cane and ushered him into the drawing-room.

"Mrs. Laughton will see you in a moment," she murmured and took her silent way back to Penelope's bedroom.

Lopez waited until he heard the faint sound of voices in the direction the maid had gone, then with catlike tread he crossed the room and reëntered the hall; from it radiated the smaller hallways leading to the twelve large rooms and servants' quarters which constituted the apartment leased by Penelope before leaving Washington for the summer. Lopez's brilliant black eyes took in with swift exactness the plan of the apartment; a rough sketch on the back of an envelope took but a second or two and then he was once again in the attractively furnished drawing-room. Penelope found him looking admiringly at two Ming vases which, converted into electric lamps, occupied posts of honor.

"Genuine and very beautiful," he commented. "May I ask, madam, where you were so fortunate as

to find these? Do not think me inquisitive, I beg," apologetically, observing her unconcealed surprise at the informal question. "I am a lover of Chinese art, and I have seen nothing like these vases outside of that country."

"They were brought here years ago by Commander Laughton's father," explained Penelope courteously. "My husband gave them to me—" she halted and bit her lip, "some years ago." Swiftly she changed the subject as she glanced down at the engraved visiting card in her hand. "Señor Lopez, is it not?"

"Yes, madam," with one of his habitual bows. "Your son's tutor."

"I have seen you with him." Penelope's easy, friendly tone masked a more rapidly beating heart. Had she not followed Bobby in her car time and again when he was driving with Lopez; had she not haunted the streets and parks he frequented for a glimpse of him, and had not her craving to be near the lad induced her to move into her present apartment? Lopez's unexpected call had taken her unawares; she must pull herself together. "Won't you sit down?" She motioned to a chair near the one she selected for herself, and Lopez noted with a cynical smile that she sat with her back to the afternoon sunshine. He did not sit down, but instead, stood looking at her.

The brief pause was broken by Lopez. "I have come for Bobby," he stated quietly.

Penelope shook a puzzled head. "Surely you don't expect to find him with me?" she questioned. "Bobby never comes here."

Lopez looked long at the frank brown eyes raised to his. As the pause lengthened he grew conscious of an accelerated pulse. Penelope was very lovely.

"I was misinformed," he said slowly. "I trust you will pardon me for keeping you indoors," conscious for the first time that she was dressed for the street. "Commander Laughton is looking for his son."

"And sent you here?" with a slight scornful smile. "I quite understand. Good afternoon, señor."

Lopez accepted his dismissal with smiling grace. "I thank, madam"—he paused to bow again. "Should you see Bobby, please send him *home,*" and well pleased with his parting shot, Lopez departed at once.

His feeling of elation, however, was short lived. What if he had at last called upon Penelope Laughton and been received as a visitor—he had not been asked to call again. Ah, it was his cursed desire to hurt that had got the better of his discretion. His uncanny intuition had probed Penelope's cherished secret—her passion for her son. It was her vulnerable point—through that he could strike.

The bamboo cane broke in Lopez's grasp and the elevator boy, hearing the sound, turned and scanned his passenger.

"How come you do that, boss?" he asked solicitously as Lopez laid the broken pieces on the seat in the elevator.

"An accident," briefly. Lopez slipped some change in the ready palm. "Throw the cane away; but first—" he paused just inside the cage, "have you taken a small boy up to Mrs. Laughton's apartment on the sixth floor?"

The negro's naturally sullen expression returned as he dropped the coins in his pocket—he felt entitled to more; Lopez had not measured up to his first estimate of him.

"I done took a lot o' ladies and gemmens up an' down," he replied. "I mighter seen a boy an' agin I mightn't."

"Perhaps this will aid your memory—" Lopez jingled some money in his hand, and his companion's eyes rolled in his head.

"Thar was a boy here 'long 'bout an hour ago," the latter admitted. "But, boss, I ain't sure which flo' he got off at. He musta slipped out wid some ladies when I wasn't lookin'."

"What's your name?" demanded Lopez, but the question went unanswered as two women and their escorts brushed past him, and the elevator shot up-

ward in obedience to their demand to be taken to the third floor.

Lopez would have further pursued his investigations as to Bobby's possible whereabouts, but a descending elevator arrived at that instant and at sight of a man towering head and shoulders above the others, Lopez ducked to the other side of the elevator shaft. From that vantage point he watched Sir Gilbert Montagu cross over to the office and stop a moment to talk to the telephone girl. Lopez was too far away to hear their conversation, but he judged that the Englishman had put in a call which, from the operator's negative shake of the head, brought him no satisfactory results.

Montagu stood in apparent indecision for nearly five minutes, then evidently a thought occurred to him, and he crossed the lobby of the apartment house to several small rooms, opening out of each other, which had been set aside for the patrons of the establishment to use as writing and lounging rooms. Totally unaware that he had attracted the attention of so insignificant person as Lopez, or that the latter had found it convenient to occupy the desk in the adjoining room, the Englishman wrote steadily for some time, covering the sheets with fine, precise writing. Drawing out an already addressed envelope, Montagu placed his letter carefully inside it, sealed the flap and after gravely balancing the

envelope in his hand, searched his pockets for stamps.

"I have some," announced a soft voice over his shoulder, and looking around Montagu spied Norma Page standing at his elbow. He was on his feet at once, a glad welcome lighting his deep blue eyes. But his smile was not returned. The conversation she had inadvertently overheard between Inspector Mitchell and the apartment clerk, Harris, earlier that afternoon was still ringing in her ears. That, and an interview immediately following, with the city editor of the *Post* had decided her upon a course of action foreign to her nature—to meet guile with guile. What she had heard, what she had observed, indicated that Gilbert Montagu was in some way connected with his uncle's murder.

Norma's loyalty was in arms, and her love for the Englishman, the depth of which she had only faintly gauged before she realized he might be in trouble, prompted her to try in her own way to establish Montagu's innocence.

"Here is preparedness for you, Gilbert," she added, producing a stamp from her handbag. "Such it is to be a business woman and a member of the ancient and honorable guild of ink-slingers."

Montagu's smile gave way to a frown. He had done his utmost to persuade Norma to keep up her secretarial work and not try journalism, but the

fascination of the "fourth estate" had won against his most convincing arguments.

"I am greatly obliged," he said, drawing forward a chair for her. "You can always be depended upon to come to your friends' assistance."

"It is delightful to find you in so amiable a frame of mind," she countered. "For here is your opportunity to be of assistance to me."

He scanned her intently, leaning forward in his earnestness.

"In what way?" he asked. "How can I aid you?"

"By permitting me to interview you for the *Post*."

"Oh!" blankly. "Dash it all!"

"No, please don't." He recognized that she was in deadly earnest in spite of her jesting tone, and his eyes never left her face. "I must, Gilbert, make good in my first assignment. Surely you would not have me a failure?"

"I would rather have you—my wife."

She drew in her breath sharply as she met his ardent gaze. "If I register failure, I will never marry you," she said soberly. "If I succeed—"

"Yes?" with passionate eagerness.

She smiled. "There will be time to answer then," she prompted gently. "Until that event transpires, suppose you let me interview you for my paper on the subject of your uncle's murder."

Montagu's expression altered, and the hand rest-

ing on the arm of his chair closed involuntarily over its tufted upholstery. It was some seconds before he spoke.

"What can I tell you of this morning's tragedy which you do not already know?" he asked suddenly, and she learned nothing from his even, expressionless tones.

"Your theory as to who killed your uncle and why." Norma spoke breathlessly, her throat felt dry and parched. Could she keep up her rôle of reporter and not let personal feeling creep into the interview? She *must*. "What was Cliff Burton doing in Mrs. Rutherford Laughton's closed apartment?"

He held up a protesting hand. "Hold, enough!" he begged. "One question at a time, *please*."

"If you will answer any one of them, I'll be as good as the proverbial patience on a monument smiling at grief."

Montagu adjusted his monocle. "Grief," he repeated, half to himself. "God, but I can't feel any grief!"

Norma, under pretense of searching in her bag for a pencil, kept her eyes lowered, and the sudden terror that filled them escaped Montagu's notice.

"You had quarreled, your uncle and you?" she asked, her voice almost a whisper—"and over a woman?" He made no attempt to break the silence,

which grew intolerable. "Was I the woman, Gilbert?"

"No." The answer shot from him with unintentional emphasis, and Montagu caught himself up sharply. "I mean, there was no quarrel; that is, Norma, Uncle Cliff and I were—oh, as the French say, not compatible. We had several differences, minor ones, and I decided I would rather live here than share his hospitality in his home. I—eh—we had no open quarrel." Montagu's fingers sought his clean-shaven lip and Norma interpreted the unconscious gesture.

"Why did you shave off your mustache and beard?" she asked.

Montagu's monocle would not stay put, and he spent a second or two placing it more firmly in his eye. "I thought it would make me appear younger," he explained, a second later. "I hope you consider the alteration an improvement?"

Norma inspected him gravely. "I prefer you clean-shaven," she admitted, with customary candor. "But you have not answered my question. Who, in your opinion, murdered Cliff Burton?"

His answer was slow in coming. "When I know the motive which inspired the crime, I can answer that question, and not before," he said slowly, and Norma sat back in her chair, chilled by the formality of his tone.

"Was it robbery, Gilbert?"

The Englishman shook his head. "We found nothing missing apparently. There was over fifty dollars in Uncle Cliff's bill folder, some loose change in his pocket, his gold watch, and signet ring; no, robbery was *not* the motive."

"How about love?"

Montagu regarded his questioner with a singular gleam in his eye. "Does your woman's intuition supply no answer to that question?"

Norma fingered her pencil nervously. "You don't surely mean Penelope?" she asked under her breath, and Montagu nodded. "You are wrong!" she declared hotly. "The idea is monstrous!"

"From Penelope's viewpoint, doubtless, but remember, there's no fool like an old one."

"You are mistaken." Norma's voice rang out clearly. "Your uncle was nobody's fool; and I'll have you understand, Gilbert, that he was only Penelope's lawyer—"

"And urging her to get an absolute divorce from Tom Laughton." Montagu sat back and regarded her. Norma's pretty color had flown, and she plucked with cold fingers at her gown. Her agitation was not lost on the tall Englishman.

"Few people know that," she protested vehemently. "And there is no necessity to bring it up now." She raised her head and regarded him intently. "With

love eliminated, Gilbert, we must consider hate as a motive."

"Hate, a primitive emotion, and common to all," replied Montagu; "a heritage from Cain."

"And again in this case the criminal wasn't able." Norma's spirit was up; Montagu had parried her questions once too often. "He left one clue behind—" she paused and let her sentence remain unfinished, while she studied her companion's expression.

"And that clue," he asked, "was what?"

"Bobby."

Montagu sat up straighter while he regarded her in silence for fully a minute. When he finally addressed her, she was impressed by the gravity of his manner.

"Ah, yes, Bobby," he agreed. "The police are of your opinion, Norma; they believe, with you, that he holds the key to the mystery. Why not," with a sidelong look at her, "interview Bobby?"

"I will, next," grimly. "Come, Gilbert, have you no theory about the murder of your uncle?"

Norma doubted if he heard the question—with head thrown back he was sniffing the air. As the scent of the cigar became more distinct, Montagu's head swung around, and he observed the portières hanging in the doorway leading to the adjoining writing room move ever so slightly. With incred-

ible swiftness in so big a man, Montagu was across the intervening space and through the portières, Norma at his heels. They were rewarded by an empty room and cigarette ashes in a tray on the writing desk by the door.

Again Montagu sniffed the air. "Excellent tobacco," he muttered, "with a peculiar aroma." He crossed the small room and looked into the main hall down which a number of persons were walking or standing in groups in animated chatter.

"Where is Mrs. Laughton?" he demanded, and Norma jumped at the suddenness of the question.

"In her apartment, waiting for me to go out to tea with her," she replied, glancing at her wrist watch.

Montagu rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I called up her apartment twenty minutes or so ago," he said, "and asked if you would both have tea with me here in the Palm Room. Her maid replied that Mrs. Laughton was lying down and could not be disturbed."

"She was to take a nap after I left her to go to my office," Norma explained. "Pen looked as if she needed sleep; she struck me as being thoroughly exhausted after luncheon. She—" Norma paused and glanced around; no one was within earshot—"she met Tom Laughton at the Army and Navy Club, and he refused to speak to her."

Montagu let his monocle dangle and regarded Norma's piquant face. As he caught the perplexity and pain in her eyes, he stepped impulsively forward, his great love overcoming his horror of a scene in public.

"Norma," he whispered, his voice tense with emotion. "Norma!"

Another breathless second and she was in his arms, his lips against hers, and the minutes passed unheeded. Norma was the first to awaken to the work-a-day world.

"This is madness," she stammered, withdrawing from his embrace with gentle firmness. "You cannot marry a pauper."

"Who says I can't"—stoutly—his eyes alight with happiness.

"Your uncle."

"Pshaw, he's dead."

"Hush!" Norma laid a terrified hand over his lips. "Oh, hush, Gilbert! No matter what happens, we must first solve the mystery of his murder."

Montagu's expression changed, and he paled. "That is a job for the police," he stated briefly. "My uncle could not influence me in life, and he is certainly not going to influence my actions now that he is dead. Will you marry me to-morrow?"

"No, certainly not!" She read aright the pain that flashed into his eyes, and regretted the hastily

spoken words. "Oh, Gilbert, do not judge me harshly; you have swept me off my feet—from my better judgment. I—I have no right to be a stumblingblock in your diplomatic career."

"Now you are raving," he stated, with a softly tender laugh. "I need you, dear, to aid me in my career and to bless my home. Now, that I know you love me, nothing matters. You were cruelly unkind to keep me in suspense all these weary weeks. Nothing shall stop our marriage; you understand me, Norma, nothing!"

"Yes—I—" Norma's heart was proving traitor to her thoughts. She must have time to reason things out, to compose herself. "I must go to Penelope," she stammered, shyness overcoming her. "Come and see us to-night," with a swift upward glance, "dear Gilbert."

He would have stopped her, but an elevator boy spied them and rushed to her side.

"Mrs. Laughton am awaitin' fo' you over yonder, miss," he said respectfully. "She says ter please come ter onct."

Montagu followed Norma's flying figure more slowly and stopped near the office at sight of Penelope and two men crossing the lobby. They hailed Norma's approach with delight, and Montagu had just made up his mind to join the group when they walked through the lobby and out of the front door.

Montagu gained the top of the steps as Nelson Thorpe walked over to his parked car, Norma by his side. A sound of hurried breathing caused Montagu to turn and look at the man beside him.

"Hello, Tom!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know you had returned."

Commander Laughton made no response, but instead stood gazing at the four people getting into Thorpe's car.

"Who's that man with my wife?" he asked.

"Nelson Thorpe," Montagu would have added more, but Laughton interrupted him with an impatient exclamation.

"Not Thorpe; I know *him*," with peculiar emphasis, and Montagu turned again to glance at his questioner. "I mean the rather small, well dressed man, wearing the ribbon of a foreign order."

"Oh! He is Boris Beloselsky."

"Well, what of him?" as Montagu paused. Beloselsky, unconscious of their concentrated regard, was helping Penelope Laughton into the car with solicitous care. "Who is he?"

"A Russian," replied Montagu, awakening from his abstraction. "Beloselsky was for a time in the old Russian diplomatic corps. He is quite popular in Washington society."

"Humph! He resembles an Oxford rotter!" in deep disgust as the Russian settled himself by Penel-

ope's side, and Thorpe drove his car down the street.

Montagu smiled into space. "The Oxford rotter," he began dryly, "is a safe and sanctified person by comparison. Beloselsky is a boon companion of Nelson Thorpe. Where are you going, Tom?" as Laughton moved suddenly.

"Up to my room for a minute, Gilbert." Then as Montagu hesitated, he asked: "Where are you off to?"

"Police headquarters." Montagu was not looking at his friend, but from the tail of his eye he caught Laughton's slight start. "I'm going down to offer a reward."

"A reward?" Laughton dropped his cap and picked it up; the exertion brought some color to his face. "A reward, did you say?"

"Yes; ten thousand dollars for the arrest of Uncle Cliff's murderer. See you later, old dear," and Montagu stalked off.

CHAPTER X

ON GUARD

MRS. RUTHERFORD LAUGHTON contemplated the four walls of her dining room with a dissatisfied frown. As a dining room, with its lovely old china and priceless glass, it gave her ample excuse for a feeling of pride; as a temporary living room it annoyed her, but a power which she strove in vain to conquer on the ground of giving way to "nerves," kept her from occupying her favorite chair in the library. She had devoured the evening papers, and the one containing an artist's sketch of the scene of the murder, in which was depicted Burton's body stretched across her library table, had decided her in favor of reading in the dining room, while Celeste, with the deftness which characterized all her movements, and the culinary skill given to most French women, prepared numerous delectable delicacies for the evening meal.

"For whom are you putting the fourth place, Celeste?" demanded Mrs. Laughton, and the maid nearly dropped a dinner plate at the suddenness of the question in the chill silence of the room. She had thought Mrs. Laughton dosing in her chair when

she had entered some moments earlier to set the table.

"For M'sieur Bobby, madame," she replied.

Mrs. Laughton's thin lips tightened their severe lines.

"Master Bobby will go to bed supperless," she declared. "I will see that he is fittingly punished for his latest trick and the fright he has given me. Who is in the pantry?" as the sound of something being set down with decided force came through the swing door.

Celeste's pretty eyebrows met in a frown. "It ees that pig of a janitor; he help me to get some ice."

Mrs. Laughton's usually passive expression denoted lively interest.

"McGuire!" she ejaculated. "Tell him to come here at once, Celeste; I desire to question him; there —don't let him escape you—run."

The order was given with such unexpected emphasis that Celeste actually jumped as she made for the swing door leading to the butler's pantry. McGuire, intent on investigating the contents of the ice box, dropped its lid with considerable force at her hasty entrance.

"I've packed it full o' ice," he explained. "I tucked the bottle o' double cream in the upper corner so 'twould keep cold, an'—"

Celeste cut him short with a brief, "Zank you, m'sieur. Ze madame, she wait to see you."

McGuire fell back a step. "Where?" he asked with a quick, uneasy glance about him which caught Celeste's instant attention.

"In ze dining room," she explained, and added under her breath, "imbecile."

Her term of derision totally lost on McGuire, the perturbed janitor laid down his cap and straightening the collar of his blue working blouse, stepped into the dining room. Mrs. Laughton nodded a pleasant good evening, and beckoned him to come to the end of the room where she was sitting.

"Well, McGuire," she began. "Where were you an hour ago when I sent for you?"

"Sure an' I was wid the leddy in 402," McGuire explained. "She's just moved in an' faix, her hot water spigots needed washers. I couldn't leave thin, ma'am; but I come as soon as I could."

Mrs. Laughton eyed him coldly. "So you wait until a tenant is moving in before fixing the plumbing," she commented dryly. "Mr. Thorpe is letting the place run down."

"Sure, ma'am, he don't own the apartment no longer."

"Indeed!" Mrs. Laughton stared at him in surprise. "And why haven't the tenants been told of a change of ownership?"

"I don't know, ma'am." McGuire shuffled his foot uneasily. "I only learned it meself this afternoon,

whin Mr. Thorpe stopped an' tould me. The deal only wint through a coupla days ago."

"I see." Mrs. Laughton drummed her tapering fingers on the mahogany table; her thoughts had gone off at a tangent, and she failed to see Celeste steal noiselessly inside the swing door and pause behind the large Japanese screen which concealed a small serving table from the view of guests. Abruptly, Mrs. Laughton turned to the waiting janitor. "Who bought the house?"

"Your son's wife, ma'am."

"What!" Mrs. Laughton half rose from her chair and then dropped back. *"What!"*

"Yes, ma'am; Mr. Thorpe said 'twas Mrs. Thomas Laughton bought the house last week," McGuire, considerably startled by the effect of his announcement on Mrs. Laughton, stared at her white face and distended eyes in alarm. "Ma'am, are you ill?"

"No, no!" she gasped, then placing her hands to her throat. "Water, for God's sake."

Before the distracted man could look about him, Celeste was at Mrs. Laughton's side, a bottle of smelling salts in one hand and a small wine glass in the other.

"Here is your tonic, madame," placing the glass as she spoke to Mrs. Laughton's lips, and as the latter sipped the stimulant, her color returned.

"Thanks, Celeste," she exclaimed weakly; "now the salts," and as the maid slowly moved the open bottle before her, "not too close. There, I feel better. Don't go, McGuire. Who is that in the hall?" as a heavy tread became audible.

Her question was answered almost before it was completed by the entrance of Commander Laughton.

"Why, mother!" he exclaimed, taking in the tableau at a glance. "Are you ill?" Then as she shook her head in vigorous negative, "What has happened to upset you?"

"Most astounding news," announced Mrs. Laughton, waving Celeste toward the background as her son advanced to her side, his face expressing grave concern. "Are you aware that this apartment house has been purchased by your wife?"

Laughton shook a bewildered head. "I know nothing about it," he answered. "There, mother, don't excite yourself—your heart—"

His mother's imperious gesture interrupted him. "Do you understand that we are living under a roof owned by that woman?" she demanded hotly, and her clenched fist struck the dinner table a blow which made the plates rattle. "That hussy—"

"Stop!" Laughton's low, stern voice brought the infuriated woman to her senses. "Penelope is my wife—" his pause was infinitesimal—"still."

"She has humiliated me in every manner," re-

torted his mother bitterly; "and now this crowning insult—to make me pay rent to her, the former beggar."

"Mother, be quiet!" Laughton emphasized his words by gripping her shoulder with a force of which he was entirely unconscious, but which made her wince. "You must control yourself." Turning to McGuire standing near Celeste, a fascinated spectator of the scene, he nodded toward the door. "Clear out."

"No, don't go!" Mrs. Laughton pulled herself together, and the passion died out of her eyes. "You can both aid me to pack; we must leave at once."

"Good!" Laughton's strong hand released its grip and rested gently on her shoulder. "I'll engage rooms at Wardman Park, mother, and we can turn this place over to the police."

Mrs. Laughton's figure stiffened in her chair, and her eyes shifted about the room. "You will do nothing of the sort," she retorted. "Why, Tom, all my most valued possessions are in this apartment. I will *never* consent to leave them in the hands of the police. I shall stay here," and she settled back with an air of finality, which made her son's heart sink; he knew his mother of old and that when her mind was once made up her resolution became adamantine.

"But, mother dear," he began, and her eyes soft-

ened at his familiar wheedling tone, "after last night this place holds only gruesome reminders of Burton's tragic death; you must move to more cheerful surroundings."

"After the mystery of his murder is cleared up," she broke in: "Yes, then I shall gladly move. Now, say no more, Tom; I shall remain here." Before he could remonstrate further, she beckoned to the janitor. "Come here, McGuire, and tell us why you admitted Mr. Burton to my vacant apartment last night."

McGuire came forward with evident reluctance. He was conscious of the naval officer's steady stare and Mrs. Laughton's fixed regard.

"I didn't let any one in your apartment, ma'am," he protested. "No, sir; Mr. Burton got in when I wasn't 'round. I didn't know nothing of the crime till Miss Page and Sir Gilbert Montagu got here close after two o'clock this morning and called me an' Detective Doyle. I let them in the apartment, and we found poor Mr. Burton a-lyin' on your table, ma'am," with long-drawn emphasis, "jest as dead as a door nail an' the handle of a knife a-stickin' outer his back." His shudder was not manufactured for their benefit, of that Laughton grew convinced as he studied the janitor; the man was unnerved, judging by his shifting gaze and unsteady hands. "It warn't a pretty picture we walked in on, Mrs. Laughton,

ma'am. 'Deed, if I was you, I wouldn't stay in this here place another hour."

A sniff was Mrs. Laughton's only answer, but it was indicative of her combative spirit.

"I am the best judge of my own plans," she declared. "So you can't give us any information as to how Mr. Burton got in this apartment," with a glance which made McGuire catch his breath, "or perhaps you *won't?*"

"I can't," the janitor protested. "I've told all I know to the police, and they believe me. Detective Doylé, who rooms with me, can bear me out, Commander," turning impulsively to the silent officer. "I'll send for him."

"Later, yes," broke in Mrs. Laughton, with her customary arrogance of tone and manner. "You may retire now, McGuire. Celeste, where is dinner?"

"But just a moment, madame," Celeste halted at the pantry door and allowed McGuire to precede her out of the room. "Will you wait for Señor Lopez and M'sieur Bobby?"

Laughton started at the question. "Isn't the boy here?" he demanded, wheeling around, and at his mother's low-spoken "No," his lips whitened, and he reached for his service cap, which he had flung down on a near-by chair on his arrival. "Where does Lopez live?"

"At the—hark! There is some one at the front door now. Celeste—" raising her voice. "Please, Tom, permit my servant to answer the door."

Her request, however, was wasted on thin air, for Laughton was halfway down the corridor. She heard the opening and closing of the front door and the murmur of voices, which grew louder as the two men approached the dining room.

"I have visited Bobby's favorite parks and seen several of his playmates," she heard Lopez say. "But discovered no trace of the boy. I hoped to find he had returned here."

Laughton's face was grave as he reëntered the library, followed by Lopez.

"Go ahead and have your dinner, mother," he said, observing Celeste standing in the doorway, a plate of hot soup in either hand. "I cannot eat now. I must start at once to look for Bobby."

With difficulty Mrs. Laughton checked her uncertain temper. "The boy is probably sitting in some moving-picture house," she said sourly, "chuckling at the fright he is giving us. Oh," catching her son's expression, "Bobby has done it before, I assure you, and taken the ticket money from my contribution box to gratify his fondness for moving pictures. Is it not so?" turning to Lopez.

The tutor confirmed her statement with a slight bow. "But this is different, madam," he added

softly. "Under the circumstances, I share the Commander's anxiety for the welfare of his son. But, sir," as Laughton stepped toward the door, "permit me to suggest that you eat your dinner, and I will take a taxi, and," he lowered his voice, "visit the hospitals; in the event that Bobby was hurt in a street accident he would be taken to one of them."

"True." Laughton hesitated. "No, mother, I don't wish any dinner. Señor Lopez has made an excellent suggestion, and I will go with him. But first," he hurried to the telephone in its small alcove just off the dining room, "I'll engage a taxi to come at once."

Lopez started to follow the naval officer when Mrs. Laughton stopped him with a wave of her hand.

"Sit down," she directed, "and enjoy some of Celeste's delicious soup. Commander Laughton will let you know when he is ready."

Celeste, taking the tutor's acceptance of Mrs. Laughton's invitation for granted, pulled out a chair and a second later, with a murmured word of thanks, Lopez was satisfying his appetite, an appetite sharpened by the fact that he had eaten no luncheon, his various activities of the day having allowed no time for that meal.

Lopez, in spite of the scar which somewhat marred his handsome features, had the appearance and man-

ners of a man of good birth, and Mrs. Laughton eyed him with approval. He had come to her highly recommended, and she had left Bobby in his care with a clear conscience and many an inward sigh of relief. Bobby's school reports had become more satisfactory since his advent and in the matter of discipline—Mrs. Laughton sighed again in content—Lopez' views of discipline concurred with hers. If Bobby was not a model child, she had no reason to reproach herself.

From the hall sounded distinctly Commander Laughton's clear, concise tones as he gave his directions over the telephone, and Mrs. Laughton ceased her attempt to keep up an aimless chatter on unimportant matters, and bent toward Lopez.

"Have you really no idea where Bobby is?" she demanded in a shrill whisper.

Lopez shook his head. "I have been unable to find any trace of him," he admitted, then hesitated. "His mother—"

"Yes?" she prompted him, one eye on the hall door. "Hurry."

"His mother declares he is not with her—" again Lopez hesitated, and Mrs. Laughton moved impatiently, an eager light in her eyes.

"You think she lied?" she asked.

Laughton's abrupt return checked the answer on Lopez' lips, and Mrs. Laughton settled back in her

chair, a heavy frown clearly indicating her irritation at the interruption.

Laughton declined Celeste's offer of broiled chicken, and instead drew out his cigarette case.

"Nothing to eat, thanks, Celeste," he said. "With your permission, mother, I'll smoke—oh, pshaw!" impatiently, as a glance showed him the case was empty, "have you any cigarettes?"

"Permit me!" and Lopez extended a package. "Please keep it and fill your cigarette case. I have more."

"Thanks." Laughton lighted a match from the box Celeste promptly placed at his plate and puffed his cigarette in silence for a moment. "I have made a list of the hospitals, mother; it may be a bit late when I get back, but don't wait up for me."

"Absurd. Of course I will," she retorted. "Do you think I could sleep in this uncertainty? Don't be unkind, Tom."

"There, mother!" Laughton, catching sight of the tears which welled up in her eyes, stroked her hand with affectionate touch. "I did not mean to hurt your feelings; forgive me. I am greatly disturbed over Bobby's protracted absence; frankly, I fear the little chap may have come to harm."

Lopez, a shrewd student of human nature, gauged the depth of Laughton's devotion to his son, by the timbre of his voice, which, strive as he did to keep it

unemotional, betrayed his pent-up anxiety to the keen-eyed man watching him across the table. Lopez broke his silence with such suddenness that Mrs. Laughton spilled a drop or two of coffee as she poured it into her cup.

"Before going to the hospitals would it not be best to report Bobby's disappearance to the police?" he asked.

"The police?" repeated Laughton; his long fingers busy inserting Lopez' cigarettes in his silver case. "Oh, yes; we can stop at headquarters after we have been to the hospitals, perhaps. Ah, what is it, Celeste?" as the French maid paused by his chair.

"Inspector Mitchell to see m'sieur," she murmured, and would have added more, but her announcement was instantly followed by the inspector in person, accompanied by Detective Doyle, who contented himself with a modest chair in a window alcove, from which he had an uninterrupted view of the occupants of the dining room.

"Sorry to interrupt your dinner, Commander," began Mitchell, bowing courteously to Mrs. Laughton, "but my time is short, sir, and being informed that your mother had returned, I stopped on my way to headquarters to interview you both."

"To interview me?" questioned Mrs. Laughton, before her son could speak, and her voice of polite

interrogation was masterly. "And pray, what about?"

"In just a moment, madam," Inspector Mitchell fumbled in his coat pocket before producing an envelope. "This letter came for you, Commander, by special messenger, early this morning." Reaching over, he laid the envelope in Laughton's outstretched hand, then addressed the latter's mother. "Mrs. Laughton, why did you order Clifford Burton out of your apartment last summer?"

The question was totally unexpected, and Mrs. Laughton's gaze wavered before the inspector's, but only for an instant; then her poise returned, and she answered with lightning promptness.

"Mr. Burton made certain allegations against my son's wife, and I did not care to hear them," she stated clearly. "He inferred—"

"Mother!" Laughton was on his feet, his eyes blazing in his white face. "Inspector Mitchell has no right to put such a question, and you will decline to answer it."

For one long moment mother and son regarded each other; then her eyes sank, and in a voice not quite natural she addressed the inspector.

"My son is right," she said. "I refer you to my attorney, Mr. Ralph Long, as my representative, hereafter."

Mitchell's smile covered mixed feelings. His eyes

swept the dining room in a comprehensive stare. "I must have a word with Bobby, Commander," he stated. "Has he gone to bed?"

Laughton transferred his attention from his mother to the inspector.

"I regret that Bobby is not here," he replied, and the odd note in his voice quickened Señor Lopez' interest. "He—we—" he stumbled in his speech, "do not know his present whereabouts."

"What!" Mitchell stared at him in dumfounded surprise. "What's that you say?"

"Bobby is not in this apartment," explained Laughton, speaking with what Detective Doyle, who had joined the circle, found maddening precision. "Señor Lopez and I are starting to look for him, as we fear the boy may have met with a serious accident."

Mitchell's expression grew grave. "That's bad news," he admitted, then more brusquely. "You realize, Commander, do you not, that Bobby is a material witness for the prosecution," his voice deepening on the last word, "in Mr. Burton's mysterious murder?"

Laughton nodded. "I imagined such would be the case after I read to-night's *Star*," he acknowledged. "If you'll excuse me, Señor Lopez and I must leave at once to find the boy."

"The police will aid you," broke in Mitchell. "I'll

drive you both to headquarters, Commander, as soon as you have finished reading your letter."

"Letter?" Laughton, whose attention had again reverted to his mother, sitting frowning in her chair, spoke confusedly. "Oh, the letter you handed to me—by—Jove, where is it?" and he gazed blankly at his empty hands and at his companions.

With one accord they joined in his search, only to find their efforts unrewarded. The letter had disappeared.

"M'sieur," Celeste spoke from the doorway; "ze taxi is here."

With a brief word to his mother, Laughton brushed by the others and hurried from the apartment, followed by Señor Lopez. As Mitchell hurried after them, Detective Doyle reached his side.

"The commander's slick, all right," he muttered under his breath, and Mitchell alone caught the words. "I'll bet Laughton pocketed his letter so as to read it when we weren't present."

CHAPTER XI

THRUST AND PARRY

THE ceaseless tapping of typewriters, the noisy activity of copy boys, and the general air of confusion which pervades newspaper offices was in full evidence when Norma Page left the elevator in the Washington *Post* Building and, passing by the City Room, entered the small office reserved for the use of the Sunday editor. "Pop" Manning looked around and hailed her with enthusiasm.

"Back again!" he exclaimed. "Ah, Miss Page, it is good to see you. Have you reported for duty?"

"Yes." Norma perched herself on a corner of the table, no chair being available, and pushed aside the various cuts and photographs with which Manning had been arranging special feature layouts for the Sunday edition. "And I've come to you for advice."

"Excellent! there's nothing I give with greater freedom." Manning's genial laugh brought a touch of comfort to Norma. It was through his friendly offices that she had obtained her present position on the staff of the *Post*. For over a year she had contributed feature articles to Manning, who had

seen their promise of real literary ability, and with the human interest which animates those of his profession, he had paused in his busy life to extend a helping hand to the young girl.

"Take her on," he had urged his chief. "Miss Page has imagination, and she isn't afraid of work; just cultivate her news sense and she'll be a star reporter before long. The fact that her family has been socially prominent in Washington for years will prove an added asset."

Norma made a very pretty picture, at least so thought Manning, and he sat back in his chair and waited in patience for her to put her thoughts into concrete speech. Finally his eyes strayed from her troubled countenance to the first page of the evening paper which Norma had knocked to the floor.

"Burton's murder has created a furore," he said, breaking the silence. "According to the *Star*, you actually saw the crime committed."

"I did." Norma sighed drearily. "I wish I could forget it." She laid a number of copy sheets in front of Manning. "The chief asked me to secure an interview, if possible, with Sir Gilbert Montagu. It's—it's my first in that line and—and would you just read it over."

"Sure," with heartening vehemence. "So you got an interview with Montagu, the British Embassy chap; the boys were talking awhile back of their

inability to land him. Montagu ought to make good copy. What relation is he to the murdered man?"

"His nephew."

"Ah!" The single exclamation denoted quickened interest, and Manning ran his eyes down the first sheet. Norma waited, in what seemed to her ever-lengthening seconds, for his verdict, but what that verdict was she never learned, for as Manning raised his head, a voice spoke from the doorway.

"Pardon, Miss Page," and Beloselsky advanced farther into the room. "Mrs. Laughton is impatient and asks that you come at once. You will excuse her, sir," with a polite bow which Manning, struggling to his feet, returned somewhat awkwardly.

"Certainly," replied Manning. "Will you be back to-night, Miss Page?"

"No; I am very tired, and the chief said that the interview would be my only assignment," Norma hesitated. "Is it very poor?"

"Good stuff," commented Manning gruffly; he was chary of spoken commendation, especially in the presence of strangers, and his lightning appraisement of Beloselsky was not complimentary to the fastidiously dressed Russian. "Leave the article with me, Miss Page, and I'll turn it in to the copy desk. See you to-morrow," and he shook hands warmly with Norma, contenting himself, however, with an informal nod to Beloselsky. They had reached the elevator

shaft before Manning went back to his desk. He spent many minutes going carefully over Norma's article, and when he finally carried it to the assistant city editor, his lips were twisted into a wry smile. "Bless the kid," he muttered under his breath. "It's a poor story that can't be worked both ways. When she sees her article in type, she will swear she wrote every word of it."

The drive to the Van Vleet in Nelson Thorpe's car consumed but ten minutes, and Norma was conscious of a feeling of vast relief when the doorman of the apartment house assisted her to alight, while Beloselsky performed a like service for Penelope Laughton. Norma had spoken no untruth when she had told "Pop" Manning that she was tired; the word did not adequately express her condition. The nervous strain she had been under since discovering Burton's dead body, her lack of sleep, and then her interview with Gilbert Montagu—Norma's pretty color heightened at the recollection, and her bright eyes gained an added sparkle. Montagu had promised to come and see her at eight o'clock; a swift glance at the clock in the lobby showed her it still lacked fifteen minutes of that hour, brief time in which to change from her street clothes to something more appropriate for the evening, but she would hurry. What was Nelson Thorpe saying?

"Stephens, my chief clerk, told me you have sev-

eral papers, Mrs. Laughton, which require my signature relative to turning the apartment house in New Hampshire Avenue over to you," he said as Penelope stepped inside the elevator. "If the papers are handy, would you like me to sign them now?"

"Indeed, yes; come right up to my apartment," and Penelope, ignoring Norma's dismay, made room for both Thorpe and Beloselsky. "I am most anxious to get the transaction completed," then with calm audacity, she asked blandly, "What is it, Norma; you look so distressed?"

"Why—eh—I have an engagement at eight o'clock," in some confusion, as she met Beloselsky's smiling eyes. "I must dress for it," and Norma gave her cousin an indignant look which would have withered a nervous person, but Penelope's soft laugh disarmed anger as she slipped her hand inside Norma's arm and led the small procession to the door of her apartment.

"Run along, Norma, and dress," she said. "We will excuse you."

Norma needed no second bidding. Not stopping to see where the others went, she hurried to her room. The minutes flew swiftly as she donned her prettiest gown, and when she paused at last before the long mirror in the door of her closet, its polished surface gave back a charming picture of girlish beauty. After patting a refractory curl in place,

Norma slipped down the long hall and into the pantry in search of a glass of ice water. A murmur of voices from the drawing-room reached her, and she indulged in a frown. She had hoped the two men would take their speedy departure and thus give her an opportunity, before Montagu arrived, to whisper to Penelope her precious secret. She had promised to marry Gilbert Montagu! Norma's pulses danced, and her color deepened. In obeying the dictates of her heart that afternoon, she had conquered doubt and banished suspicion. Gilbert was not, *could* not, be involved in any way in the dastardly murder of his uncle.

If only her mother had lived to be her confidante! Norma brushed away unbidden, bitter tears as she crossed the pantry and filled a glass from the pitcher. The water was icy cold and very refreshing. A dim-a-light had been left burning and by its rays, Norma saw a small tray on which were piled a number of soiled plates and dishes. Norma eyed them in surprise. It was not like Susie, Penelope's excellent maid, to be untidy; perhaps she had been delayed and in her hurry had overlooked the dishes. Susie was not staying at the apartment at night, and the cook, owing to Penelope's unexpectedly early return, was not due there for another two weeks. Under the circumstances, Penelope and Norma were taking their meals in the café on the first floor, and Norma

remembered that Susie was instructed to go there also; she recalled meeting the maid in the lobby on her way out, just before her interview with Sir Gilbert Montagu. Susie had told her then that Penelope had given her permission to go off early and not return until the next morning.

Penelope and Norma had motored to the Chevy Chase Club with Nelson Thorpe and Boris Beloselsky and dined with them there, and Norma had commenced to wonder why Penelope, to whom variety was the spice of life, had accepted an invitation for luncheon and dinner from Nelson Thorpe on the same day. Little Beloselsky Norma found most amusing at all times, but she had never cared particularly for Thorpe even in the old days, and his frank devotion to Penelope at dinner had annoyed Norma almost to open rudeness. Norma had stolen into a writing room at the end of dinner and there had written her article for the *Post,* and Penelope had insisted upon their driving her cousin into Washington, and declining Thorpe's suggestion of a theater, had waited outside the Post Building for Norma to rejoin them.

Norma had a horror of red ants and, knowing their prevalence in apartment kitchens, she put down her empty glass and picking up the tray with its remnants of a repast, put it on the service elevator, closed the door and pressed the first-floor button.

The porter would return the dishes to the café. A glance at the clock in the kitchen showed her that it was ten minutes past eight. The front door bell had not sounded, of that she was positive; Sir Gilbert Montagu must have been detained; of old she knew him to be promptness itself.

Norma was again impressed with the size of the apartment as she went slowly down the corridor in the direction of the drawing-room. Both hallways and rooms were of unusual size and gave an air of spaciousness and coolness, very inviting on a September night. Several of the rooms appeared closed, and Norma paused long enough to open the doors and windows to make a draught through the apartment. One door, which Norma knew opened into Penelope's boudoir, was locked. Her thoughts elsewhere, Norma gave the handle an extra turn to satisfy herself that it would not open, and then joined Penelope and her guests.

Penelope was sitting before her Boule desk, and Norma caught a glimpse of her check book as she closed one of the drawers. Thorpe, seated on a near-by sofa, reading a legal-looking document, never raised his head at Norma's entrance, but Beloselsky sprang up at once and moved forward a chair for her.

"Welcome, most welcome, Miss Norma," he exclaimed gayly. "I have listened to such dry

technicalities. Madam is the party of the second part and so on," with a wave of his hand toward Thorpe as the latter drew out his fountain pen and, resting the document on a magazine, wrote his name with painstaking care. "They have ignored me, these two, and I have nothing to fall back on but the evening papers and the murder of poor Cliff Burton."

"Why do you bother with it, Beloselsky?" asked Thorpe brusquely, handing the document to Penelope.

"To be quite frank, the novelty of the murder has intrigued me," declared the Russian; "and I have read every little detail down to the smallest—"

"Have you reached any conclusions?" asked Thorpe, replacing his reading glasses in their case and pocketing it.

Before answering, Beloselsky glanced across at Penelope. "You have no feeling in the matter, madam?"

"I? Oh, no." Penelope passed her handkerchief gently across her lips and then spread it out on the Boule desk until each little wrinkle was as smooth as the tiny initials, daintily embroidered in one corner. "In fact," and her gaze passed around the small circle and rested affectionately on Norma, "I am deeply interested in anything which touches my mother-in-law, and to have Clifford Burton murdered

in that estimable lady's home piques my curiosity. Can you blame me?"

A laugh, that was half a sneer, accompanied the question, and Norma looked swiftly at Penelope. She was aware of the animus which Mrs. Laughton bore her beautiful daughter-in-law, but Penelope had seemed impervious to her shafts and had borne herself with admirable tact as far as their outward relations were concerned. Norma had marveled at the younger woman's self-control as well as self-restraint; never once in their intercourse had she complained to Norma of the older woman's slanderous gibes which well-meaning friends had occasionally repeated to her.

"Blame you!" echoed Thorpe. "By heaven, I should say not! I wonder how Mrs. Laughton explains Burton's presence in her apartment last night? Is there anything about *that* in the evening paper, Boris?"

The Russian shook his head. "Not a word," he answered. "The paper stresses the fact that Madam Laughton was away for the summer, and that only the boy, Bobby, was occupying the flat. It speaks much of you, Miss Norma, and that you took Sir Gilbert Montagu to find his dead uncle."

Thorpe transferred his gaze from Penelope to Norma, and she was startled by its penetrating quality.

"How was it that Montagu accompanied you to the apartment?" he inquired.

"I asked him to go with me," promptly; "in fact, it was I who told him his uncle had been murdered."

"Did you telephone to Montagu?" And at Thorpe's persistency, Norma's eyes opened in surprise.

"Oh, no," she replied. "I met Sir Gilbert in the corridor just as I left here to investigate what I had seen through the window of the opposite apartment. I hadn't been here before and wasn't familiar with the locality. Sir Gilbert then accompanied me to what proved to be Mrs. Rutherford Laughton's home."

Thorpe's heavily-lidded eyes considered Norma for a moment, then shifted to Penelope, who had squirmed around in her seat and sat with her back partly turned toward her companions. Her gaze was riveted on the corridor, and her head bent in a listening attitude. When Thorpe spoke finally, his manner was entirely serious.

"What was Sir Gilbert doing in the corridor at that hour of the morning to meet you so opportunely?" he asked.

Norma stared aghast at her questioner and a hot wave of color mounted almost to her brow.

"What do you mean to infer?" she demanded, her indignation rising. "My meeting with Sir Gilbert

was quite accidental. Is it your intention, Mr. Thorpe, to be insulting by such a question?"

"Norma!" Penelope crossed the room and laid a restraining hand on Norma's shoulder as the girl started to rise. "Mr. Thorpe had no such intention, I am sure," with a glance which brought Thorpe to his feet; "he was merely unfortunate in his phrasing of the question."

"Just so," declared Thorpe earnestly. "I assure you, Miss Page, you misconstrued my meaning. I merely wished to know, from idle curiosity, what Montagu was doing strolling around at that hour in the morning."

"I presume he was on his way to his apartment," replied Norma, slightly mollified by Thorpe's apologetic manner, and she leaned back again in her chair. Penelope, relieved by the girl's action as well as by her words, started to recross the room to her old seat when she detected the faintest sound of the buzzer over the front door, and instead, she sped silently into the corridor. "You know, Mr. Thorpe," went on Norma, unaware that her cousin was no longer in the room, "that Sir Gilbert and Commander Laughton have an apartment on the same floor with us here in the Van Vleet."

"And you think he was on his way to his apartment?" asked Beloselsky, who had followed their rapid interchange of remarks with absorbed attention.

"Why, yes," answered Norma, and her sunny smile dispelled her frown as she looked across at the Russian; her resentment against Thorpe, however, was not lessened by seeing him pick up, and fondle, Penelope's Angora cat, which Susie had brought back that morning from his temporary summer quarters with the janitor's wife. "But to set your mind at rest, Mr. Beloselsky, I will ask Sir Gilbert the next time I see him."

"Do so," remarked Thorpe, striving to make his manner conciliatory. "And you might also inquire *where* Montagu was coming from at that hour."

Thorpe had not troubled to lower his naturally strident tones, and they carried easily to Sir Gilbert Montagu as the young diplomat followed Penelope along the corridor. He waited courteously for his hostess to enter and then walked into the room and paused at Thorpe's elbow.

"I seem to be the subject of discussion," he said, with a faint, humorous twinkle in his deep blue eyes, as he bowed to the two men and held Norma's hand in a warm pressure for a second. "Which of my shortcomings are you pointing out, Thorpe?"

Thorpe's brick-red complexion assumed a deeper hue; otherwise his surprise at Montagu's unexpected arrival was carefully concealed.

"Oh, I was just wondering what kept you out so late last night," he said. "Miss Page was telling us

of running into you when she went to investigate your uncle's murder—quite a coincidence, wasn't it?"

"Quite," agreed Montagu, adjusting his monocle in his eye as he sat down near Norma. His firm mouth relaxed into an almost boyish smile. "It does happen occasionally that we diplomats are Johnny-on-the-spot; eh, Beloselsky?"

"Indeed, yes, Sir Gilbert," responded the Russian, and his softly modulated voice was soothing to the ear. "We were commenting on the murder of your uncle, a most shocking affair. Permit me to offer my condolences."

"Thanks." Montagu looked at his companions unobtrusively. He was conscious of an atmosphere of antagonism in spite of Beloselsky's kindly countenance and Penelope Laughton's air of eager friendly interest, an interest which Nelson Thorpe watched under lowering brows. The Englishman caught Norma's shy gaze for an instant, and its message of tender trust stirred his pulse to a quicker beat. "By the way, Beloselsky, you knew my uncle intimately, did you not?" he added, turning to the Russian with some abruptness.

"I was honored by his friendship, yes," Beloselsky replied, pausing first to light a cigarette. "If I may say so, Burton was a man of moods; neither his friends nor his enemies knew quite where to find him."

"Ah, then you knew him to have enemies?"

At the swiftly-put question, Penelope drew in her breath sharply, but except for an added seriousness, Beloselsky's expression did not alter, and his dark eyes rested tranquilly on his stalwart questioner.

"Your uncle could not be called a popular man, Sir Gilbert," he said. "Enemies, however, is perhaps too strong a term; there were those who disliked him—"

"And who were they?"

"Possibly some of his business associates." Beloselsky turned to Thorpe. "Am I right or wrong, my friend?"

Thorpe stopped fingering his watch fob and pushed a lock of hair off his forehead.

"To tell you the truth, Sir Gilbert," he said, speaking with deliberation, "Burton's manner could not be called ingratiating, and—well, he wasn't always careful of other people's feelings."

"Particularly when he lost money in a financial deal," added Montagu dryly, as Thorpe paused. "How much did you let him in for in that Russian oil concession? Twenty thousand?"

Thorpe's hand crept to his collar and he settled his tie before answering.

"Around that amount," he acknowledged, with much self-control, but which the glance he shot at Montagu belied. "You are mistaken, Sir Gilbert,

in thinking that I persuaded your uncle to invest in the oil concession; on the contrary, I warned him not to go into the deal."

"Ah, then it was too bad he did not follow your advice," with faint emphasis; "and particularly unfortunate that you did not warn him not to go to Mrs. Laughton's apartment last night."

Two pairs of eyes flashed like a sword's thrust across the table, but a woman's intuition was as swift as they, and Penelope's clear voice broke the tense stillness.

"Were you coming from that apartment, Sir Gilbert, when you met Norma?" she asked.

"No," responded Montagu; and Norma, who had watched the men in fascinated silence, knew by the faint flicker of his eyelid and the almost imperceptible change in his expression, that the Englishman had lied unblushingly.

CHAPTER XII

A GAME TWO CAN PLAY

THE mist of the early evening had settled into a heavy rain, and Commander Laughton turned up the collar of his coat as he sprang out of the taxi and paused to pay the chauffeur. Lopez, his hat pulled low over his forehead, waited for Laughton before entering the Van Vleet. As they passed up the steps, the electric light from the ornamental iron lanterns, which decorated the front entrance, shone full on their faces, and a medium-sized negro boy clutched his smaller companion and ducked out of sight. The precaution was unnecessary. Laughton glanced neither to right nor left as he entered the building, crossed the lobby, and stopped at the desk, Lopez at his heels.

"What is the number of Mrs. Laughton's apartment?" he inquired as a sleepy-eyed clerk came forward to the counter.

"Apartment 615, sir." The clerk stepped back a second to verify his statement with the list of tenants on the telephone rack. "Do you wish to leave a message for her?" drawing forward a pad and pencil as he spoke.

"No, thanks." Laughton moved away from the desk, and then halted. "Has Sir Gilbert Montagu come in?"

"I believe so," the clerk reached for one of the telephone instruments. "Shall I call up and see?"

"No; I am on my way to his apartment now. Good night."

"Good night, sir," and the clerk retired to the cashier's cage.

At the elevator shaft Lopez touched his companion on his arm.

"Hadn't I better leave now, Commander?" he asked. "Or is there something else I can do for you?"

"Come with me; that is," with a frank, friendly smile which completely altered his expression of stern repression, "if you are not worn out? You have been very good, very kind, to-night."

"I am glad to be of service," protested Lopez. "I am not weary."

"Then let us go upstairs," and without further words Laughton led the way into the elevator. "Sixth floor," he directed and lapsed into silence. Still in silence, he left the elevator and started down the corridor. He had proceeded but a short distance when he stopped abruptly in front of a door on which Lopez saw the numerals 615, and raised his hand toward the bell button beneath them.

"Beg pardon, Commander," exclaimed Lopez; "but this is not your apartment."

Laughton nodded grimly. "I know it," he said; "I desire to have a talk with," he touched the bell button with no uncertain pressure, "my wife."

Lopez contemplated him with an inscrutable expression. "At this hour?" he asked softly. "Think, Commander, it is after midnight."

Laughton's state of mind found vent in an oath. "To h—l with the hour!" he exclaimed below his breath, but loud enough to reach Lopez' ears. "I must see Mrs. Laughton, and," his voice deepening, "I wish you to be present at the interview."

There was no time for Lopez to reply. The door was pulled softly back, and Penelope stood framed in the doorway, eying them in speechless astonishment. She had sent Norma to bed soon after Montagu departed; Thorpe and Beloselsky having shortened their visit perceptibly upon the, to them, unexpected arrival of the tall Englishman. Her talk with Norma, in which the younger girl had told her of her engagement to Montagu, had aroused bittersweet memories which she could not put aside, and not troubling to undress, save to don a becoming negligee, she had turned on the reading lamp and, selecting a novel which had created a small sensation, she had sought distraction in its pages. Laughton gave her no time for thought.

"Sorry to disturb you at this hour," he said. "It is imperative that I see you. I will detain you only a moment; but," with a side glance up and down the long corridor, "we cannot talk here."

Penelope, collecting her wits, drew back. "Come in," she said, and Lopez secretly applauded her quiet acceptance of the situation. "You also, Señor Lopez." She closed the front door and led the way to the drawing-room, switching on the electric light as she went. She motioned to a chair, but Laughton declined it.

"I prefer to stand," he said; then added in a voice low and determined: "I have come for the boy."

Penelope stared at her husband as if she thought him demented.

"What boy?" she demanded.

"Your son and mine."

"Bobby?"

"Certainly. Please call him."

Penelope gazed open-eyed first at her husband and then at Lopez. "You are pleased to be facetious," she said, with a slight catch in her voice. "You know very well, Tom, that this is the last place Bobby would be."

"That is just why I have come here," Tom answered firmly. "We have been unable to find Bobby anywhere else."

Penelope raised one hand to her temple and pushed

back her soft, abundant hair and the pupils of her eyes grew distended.

"What am I to understand?" she faltered. "Has —has Bobby disappeared?"

"He is not with his grandmother nor with any of his playmates," stated Laughton slowly. "We have been to all the hospitals and private sanitariums, and no boy answering his description has been taken to any of them because of illness or injury." He sighed heavily. "We are very tired. If you will kindly get Bobby, we will leave at once."

Lopez doubted if she heard Laughton's last words. But one idea was uppermost, and she turned ghastly pale.

"Bobby is lost," she stammered. "My little son— oh, God!" and but for Laughton's quick spring to her side she would have fallen. He helped her to a chair and Lopez, spying several bottles of Appolinaris water, one unopened, which Penelope had offered her guests earlier in the evening, filled a glass and gave it to her. Penelope sipped the water gratefully; her throat felt parched and her head was whirling.

"You must find Bobby," she exclaimed, as soon as she could speak. "Please, Tom, now at once."

Laughton, who had been fighting down his wild longing to take her in his arms, fighting against his mad desire to cast aside all barriers and plead with

her to forget the long, bitter years of their separation, started as if stung. The hot blood mounted to his forehead, and a revulsion of feeling swept aside his moment of weakness as suspicion gained supremacy.

"Pray spare us your heroics;" his low, bitter voice cut Penelope like a whip lash. "And send Bobby here."

She put down her half-empty glass and rose unsteadily to her feet, her face ghastly.

"I have told you that Bobby is not here," she stated clearly. "How many times do you wish me to repeat that fact before you will believe it?"

Laughton looked keenly about the drawing-room before replying.

"Are you the only grown-up person in the apartment?" he asked.

"Except for Norma Page, yes."

"Will you call her, please."

Penelope raised her head and bending slightly forward looked at her husband queerly. "Why?" she asked.

"I desire to question her," he stopped and moved uncomfortably as he met Penelope's blazing eyes.

"How dare you?" she said, and hot anger kept her voice low. "You came uninvited; now go, before I have you ejected."

But Laughton stood his ground. "I will not leave," he announced stubbornly, with face as white as hers, "until I have assurance, other than yours, that Bobby is not concealed here. Oh, I know something of your plans," he added, as she started to interrupt him with fierce indignation. "Clifford Burton had warned me of your desire to kidnap Bobby."

Penelope stood rigid, regarding her husband, apparently bereft of speech as a soft footfall sounded on the hardwood floor of the hall and Norma Page, but half-awake, stepped inside the drawing-room. She started back at sight of Laughton and Lopez and drew her silk kimono about her.

"Why, Tom!" she gasped, and tried to tuck her bare feet out of sight. "Oh, Pen, excuse me. I heard voices, and then I thought I heard my name. I—I—didn't mean to disturb you."

"Don't go." Penelope stepped forward and slipped her hand in Norma's and the latter started at her icy touch. "Commander Laughton desires you to confirm my statement that Bobby is not with me in this apartment."

"Bobby here? Oh, no." Norma's frank young voice rang out instantly, and carried conviction. She glanced at her companions. "You don't mean that Bobby has disappeared?"

"It would seem so," replied Laughton, stooping

to pick up his cap, which he had dropped on the floor when he went to Penelope's assistance. "When did you last see Bobby, Norma?"

"He left me here at the door of the apartment," Norma added the last clause on catching sight of Laughton's frown. "Bobby wouldn't come inside with me, although I begged him to do so." She felt Penelope's hand quiver ever so slightly, and seeing Laughton's eyes still bent upon her, continued hurriedly, "Bobby left word with the elevator boy that he was going to his grandmother's apartment and would wait for me there. Haven't you seen him, Señor Lopez?"

Lopez shook his head. "No, Miss Page, and I have searched most diligently for him. I greatly fear—" he stopped hastily as Penelope threw up her hand as if to ward off a blow.

"Don't," she whispered. "I can't stand it." She turned her agonized gaze toward her husband, all else forgotten in her anxiety for her son. "You must find him; don't stand there doing nothing; go to the police and ask for their aid."

Laughton hesitated, then signing to Lopez, he went into the hall, but once there, he turned back and addressed his wife.

"I will send you word if Bobby turns up," he said, and catching Lopez by the arm with a grip which hurt, he hurried the tutor out of the apart-

ment, utterly unconscious of the latter's attempts to lag behind.

As the front door closed behind her husband, Penelope stood motionless for nearly a minute, then staggered toward the hall.

"Help me to bed, Norma," she whispered, through trembling lips. "Oh, I am ashamed to cry; ashamed to admit that any man has the power to cut me to the heart. Pray God, Norma, that Gilbert Montagu is not a fiend in human shape," and to Norma's utter consternation, Penelope burst into a flood of tears.

It was fully two hours later when Norma crept back to her room and into bed. At last Penelope had fallen into a fitful sleep, and Norma felt that she could leave her cousin. It had grown colder and the girl was unpleasantly conscious, from her stiffened muscles, that the last day of September was over—what a day it had been! Norma sighed—perhaps October would usher in better fortune. A second or two later her eyes closed, and she slept like a tired child.

Her sleep, however, was not of long duration. She awakened with a growing sense of depression, and was at first unable to account for it, then as recollection grew, the incidents of the night recurred to her with startling vividness. Slowly she conned over the scene between Gilbert Montagu and the two

men, Nelson Thorpe and Boris Beloselsky. She had never cared particularly for Nelson Thorpe, and she bitterly resented his manner toward Montagu that night, and— She sat up in bed, the pillows felt hot and uncomfortable. Why had her sixth sense warned her that Gilbert Montagu had lied in stating that he was not at Mrs. Rutherford Laughton's apartment the night before? It was absurd—no, it was worse than absurd; it was disloyal to doubt Montagu's statement. After all, what had she to go on? Just a feeling—pshaw, what a fool she was! With this comforting reflection, Norma lay down in bed again.

But court sleep as she did, it would not come. She had killed one head of the dragon, doubt; but another had taken its place. Bobby, where in the world was Bobby? Was his disappearance but a thoughtless boyish prank? Had any harm come to the child? The thought was not quieting, and she squirmed about the bed in unhappy silence. Where could Bobby have gone? She ran over all the most unlikely places where he might have hidden. But why should the boy hide? Norma shook a bewildered head. Suddenly an idea occurred to her of a so startling nature that she almost fell out of bed.

Bobby was in the Laughton apartment at the time Clifford Burton was killed. Suppose the police believed the lad knew *who* stabbed Burton and had

secretly locked him up as a material witness? Norma felt very shaky as to the power of the law under such circumstances; in regard to the metropolitan police department and its inner workings, she was not very "knowledgeable," to use her black mammy's term. Was the idea worth repeating to Penelope Laughton? On second thought, it might not comfort a small boy's mother to suggest that he was in a police cell, even through no fault of his own.

Norma lay back in bed and tried to compose herself for slumber. It was no use; her active brain would conjure up first one idea and then another. If Bobby wasn't in a police cell, where was he? Where could a small boy of twelve be hidden in the city of Washington? And why should he be hidden anywhere? Norma caught her breath and one hand flew to her mouth to stifle an exclamation. She must not awaken Penelope. Suppose, suppose the criminal had learned through the public press of Bobby's presence in the Laughton apartment, and fearing the boy's testimony, had abducted him!

It was truly an alarming thought. Norma felt cold all over. Should she call up her cousin, Tom Laughton and suggest it to him? No; her lips closed firmly; she would not willingly speak to her cousin again after his insulting behavior to his wife. How dared he doubt Penelope's word when she said the boy was not in the apartment? Why it was

preposterous to suppose that Bobby was concealed on the premises; there wasn't a room which was not open—

"Which was not open," Norma repeated the words aloud semi-consciously; she had found one room closed to her that evening when she tried the door of Penelope's boudoir on her way to join her cousin and her two guests in the drawing-room. And come to think of it, she had asked Penelope if she did not wish her bedroom door, which communicated with the boudoir, opened to make a current of air, and Penelope had replied, in marked haste, that she feared a draught as she had taken cold that afternoon.

Suppose Bobby was in that room? The idea took Norma's breath away. For long minutes she lay battling with suspicion. No, it could not be; what possible object could Penelope have in concealing her own son? Oh, the idea was preposterous! Like a flash Norma recollected the tray from the café with its soiled dishes which she had found in the pantry. She had wondered at the time who the food was for—Bobby?

Norma rose, her mind made up. Donning her kimono and slippers she tiptoed softly down the hall to the boudoir door—it was still locked. Norma released the knob and stood leaning against the door, but only for a moment. With an air of settled

determination she continued down the hall and with catlike tread entered Penelope's bedroom. It was the one she had occupied the night before, and she was fairly familiar with the location of the furniture and the communicating door leading to the boudoir. Penelope used a night light and, by its dim flame, Norma made out her cousin lying asleep. She gained the door without disturbing Penelope and, turning the knob with infinite pains, stepped inside the boudoir.

The room was quite large, and as Norma's eyes grew more accustomed to the dim light she picked out different objects in their summer cretonne covers. A couch toward the end of the room was her objective. As she drew nearer she distinguished something lying upon it. Norma's heart was beating like a triphammer as she crept forward and laid her hand on a summer blanket—and that was all.

Norma checked her inclination to hysterical laughter. She had conjured up a mare's nest. Bobby was not there, her cousin Penelope was never to be doubted. In her reaction Norma almost sang aloud as she turned around—and her blood froze in her veins. Coming toward her she made out the dim outlines of a white, shrouded figure which appeared to stagger rather than walk.

For one brief instant Norma was frozen to the spot; then instinctively she backed away, her hands

spread wide behind her. Back, back she went until she brought up against the wall and leaned weakly against it, a loud buzzing in her ears, which gained in volume until the room was filled with noisy ringing. Would it never stop—was she going utterly mad?

A light flashed on, and Norma saw that she was confronted by her cousin, whose white negligee trailed from her shoulders.

"Norma, what's the matter?" she demanded, breathless. "And why are you ringing the electric bell? There, look behind you," and Norma turned to find her finger was pressed tightly over the push button. Without a word, Norma dropped weakly into the nearest chair and laughed wildly, immoderately, while Penelope, thoroughly frightened, sought her bottle of spirits of ammonia.

Back in his hall bedroom in a boarding house in the once fashionable neighborhood of G and Twentieth Streets, Northwest, Señor Lopez divested himself of his wet coat and shoes, and curling up on the bed, drew from his trousers' pocket a crumpled envelope. He stared at the address, "Commander Thomas Laughton," then turned the envelope over and ran his sensitive fingers along its flap.

"Steamed open and resealed," he muttered. "Inspector Mitchell scored one there, but," his smile was cynical, "he wasn't quick enough to detect me when

I purloined the envelope which Commander Laughton dropped under their noses."

At the thought Lopez indulged in silent mirth; his shoulders shook. He stuffed the bedclothes into his mouth to stifle queer, uncanny noises. Suddenly he sobered and sat up. Drawing out a penknife he deftly turned back the flap of the envelope and read the message:

beware of the bear that walks like a man

With eyes grown suddenly hard and merciless, Lopez smoothed out the sheet of paper and regarded it long and intently.

"So Celeste Laporte can practice treachery," he said, below his breath, and unconscious that he spoke aloud: "Well, that is a game that two can play."

CHAPTER XIII

THE SECOND INITIAL

THE sound of running water and much splashing came distinctly through the bathroom door, which had been left slightly ajar; then a fine, spirited tenor voice echoed through the apartment:

So I gave my heart to my lady's keeping
And ever her strength on mine shall lean,
And the stars shall fall and the heavens be weeping
Ere I cease to love her; my Queen—my Queen!

The singing stopped abruptly as the door swung open, and Montagu, his body tingling from the cold shower, walked through the hall on his way to his bedroom. He called Commander Laughton's name as he passed the latter's closed door and, getting no answer, stepped inside the room; a glance showed him that it was empty and that the bed had not been slept in. A puzzled frown wrinkled Montagu's forehead and he stood twirling the cord of his dressing gown for some seconds. He had gone to bed shortly after midnight, having waited up for Laughton until that hour. He had slept heavily, dreamlessly,

and on awakening had taken it for granted that the naval officer must have come in and gone to his bedroom without disturbing him. Montagu's thoughts on the subject were cut short by the sound of a key being inserted in the lock of the front door, and its hasty opening and closing with a bang which jarred every picture on the walls.

"Hello!" called Montagu. "By Jove, old dear, but you have nocturnal habits; night before last on the go, and never showing up last night! What have you on your conscience that you cannot sleep?"

Laughton came into the bedroom and halted before the tall Englishman.

"Bobby's gone," he said, simply.

"Gone? Gone where?"

"God knows!" Laughton's gesture was expressive and without further word he walked over to the window and looked outside; when he had full command over his voice he turned again to his silent companion. "I have seached Washington for Bobby, and the police have aided. We can find no trace of the boy. It is as if the city had opened and swallowed him whole." He clenched his hands spasmodically. "I am miserable, Gilbert, miserable."

Montagu went swiftly to him and laid his arm around his shoulder.

"I understand," he said. "Poor chap."

"I don't believe you do." Laughton swallowed

hard. "Bobby's more precious to me because of, well—" looking his friend squarely in the eye, "because he's like his mother; he's got her voice and certain mannerisms." Laughton sighed heavily. "Poor Bobby. That's why his grandmother dislikes him. Oh, I know—" as Montagu moved suddenly.

"How?" the latter demanded sharply.

"From just a word here and there which Celeste dropped last night and again this morning. The lad hasn't been happy, Gilbert."

"I wouldn't take a servant's word—"

"It isn't only her word; there are certain little things—" Laughton broke off abruptly. "I should never have left Bobby under mother's guardianship, I realize that now. She's grown self-centered and —inclined to be prejudiced—" Laughton floundered around hopelessly for a moment, before adding in haste: "Forget what I have said, Gilbert, like the loyal friend you are, and give me your advice. Where else can I look for Bobby?"

"Where have you tried to find him?"

"At the hospitals and the homes of his playmates." Laughton sighed again. "Lopez went with me."

"Lopez?" questioningly. "Ah, the tutor."

"Yes; good chap." He turned as he spoke and commenced to pace the room with long, nervous strides. "Well, have you any suggestions?"

The abrupt question brought Montagu out of a

brown study. "No—not off-hand," he hesitated. "Perhaps Norma Page—"

"I saw her last night." A tinge of red crept into Laughton's haggard cheeks. "I stopped at my wife's apartment to inquire for Bobby; he wasn't there; then Lopez and I went to the police, and later to my mother's apartment, where Lopez left me. I couldn't stay idle, however, and walked the streets, hoping to catch sight of the boy."

Montagu looked at his friend in increasing concern. "See here," he exclaimed with such energy that Laughton stopped in his restless pacing and stared at him. "You must have proper sleep, and I'll wager you've eaten neither dinner nor breakfast. Oh, that's bally rot," as Laughton gave vent to an impatient exclamation. "You must take care of your health. Off with those damp clothes, and into a hot tub; I'll draw the water now," and utterly ignoring Laughton's feeble protests, he dragged off the latter's coat, and speeding out of the room, soon had the tub filled with steaming water. Half an hour later, fully dressed, he carried a breakfast tray into Laughton's room. The latter was sitting up in bed, and his eyes brightened at sight of Montagu.

"I feel like a fool," he admitted, as he poured out the fragrant coffee. "I ought to be up and not lying here."

"You have been forty-eight hours without sleep,

that's excuse enough," retorted Montagu. "Finish your breakfast and put the tray on the bed table; I'll see the café people get it later, and," with all an Anglo-Saxon's distaste for any display of sentiment, "try and not worry over Bobby. I know the youngster fairly well; he used to take long walks with Norma," his eyes lit up with a quick mischievous smile, "and *voilà tout!* Bobby's a manly little fellow, quick-witted and imaginative; I'll lay my last shilling that he has not come to harm."

Laughton's expression brightened and leaning forward he wrung Montagu's hand. "Where are you off to?" he asked, as the young diplomat made for the door.

"To find Bobby," was the instant rejoinder in a voice which carried conviction and Laughton, his eyelids heavy with sleep, turned wearily back to the tempting breakfast and his torturing thoughts.

But once outside his apartment Montagu's footsteps lagged, and he was deep in thought when he left the elevator on the ground floor. He stopped for a moment at the desk and gave orders to have his telephone temporarily discontinued so that Laughton's much-needed sleep might not be disturbed. On leaving he waved aside the doorman's offer of a taxi, and, tucking his cane under his arm, strode down the street, brushing by pedestrians in blind haste until he reached Connecticut Avenue and N

Street; there he paused long enough to enter a florist's shop. After making his selection with particular care, he gave Norma's name and address to the clerk, then crossed the street to the British Embassy. He was greeted, on entering the Chancery, by one of the staff who hailed him with relief.

"There have been numerous telephone calls for you, Sir Gilbert," the latter said. "Several newspaper men and photographers requesting appointments. I put them off," hastily, observing Montagu's frown. "Inspector Mitchell of central office has called a number of times; he tried to reach you at the apartment, but the clerk there said you had just left."

"Did Mitchell leave any message?"

"He asked that you meet him at ten o'clock at your uncle's residence in Hillyer Place," the secretary explained, and added in some haste as Montagu dropped into a chair, "The inspector said that it was imperative that you be there."

"Oh, very well," Montagu tossed down his cane and gloves. "My mail," he demanded, and as it was handed to him, he thrust all else from his mind. Half an hour was spent in going carefully over the letters and dictating replies to such as required immediate attention, and then Montagu rose, after first consulting his watch.

"You can reach me at my uncle's residence," he

said. "I presume the telephone has not been disconnected. By the way, when do you expect the ambassador?"

"To-night. He wired that he would get here on the 6:35 train." The secretary laid down his stenographic notes and stood up. "I suppose you saw by the paper that the President is again at the White House."

"Yes." Montagu twiddled with a pencil for a second, then reached for the desk telephone. "You need not wait, Foster," and with a bow the secretary retired. It took Montagu several long minutes to get Penelope Laughton's apartment as Susie, immersed in trunks, which she was unpacking with elaborate care, did not at first hear the bell. In response to Montagu's impatient inquiries she vouchsafed the information that Penelope and Norma had eaten an early breakfast and gone out immediately afterward; that she did not know where, and that Bobby was most certainly *not* in the apartment. To emphasize the last statement, Susie raised her voice almost to a bellow, and Montagu hastily removed the receiver from close proximity to his ear; before he could ask another question Susie had hung up the receiver.

Montagu sat back in his chair and contemplated his surroundings with mixed feelings. He had carefully refrained from calling Norma earlier in the morning, as she had told him, being on a morning

newspaper, she would have to work at night and sleep late in the daytime. He had asked both Penelope and Norma to dine with him that night, but that was a long way off; he had confidently expected to take Norma out to luncheon, or to at least have the pleasure of walking down town with her.

With an impatient exclamation Montagu consulted the telephone directory and then again applied himself to securing the number he wanted; this time he was not kept waiting, for Mrs. Rutherford Laughton responded at once. When she understood who was speaking, her voice became less austere.

"Oh, Sir Gilbert!" she exclaimed. "How kind of you to call up and inquire for Bobby. No, he has not returned. I do not share my son's forebodings that he may have come to harm; personally, I believe, having stayed away for twenty-four hours, he is now afraid to return for fear of punishment. I know *Bobby*," with emphasis. "He has suffered from a guilty conscience before this."

"Who has not?" asked Montagu, as Mrs. Laughton came to a breathless pause. "Conscience makes cowards of us all. Beg pardon, what did you say?" Getting no response he whanged the hook up and down until an irate operator told him the other party had hung up.

Montagu pushed the instrument away and sat back in his chair. In spite of his farewell words to

Laughton, he had not been sanguine of locating Bobby; he had called up the lad's grandmother in the forlorn hope that Bobby might have returned, and not from any desire to talk to Mrs. Laughton. He had been taken to see her by Norma on his arrival in Washington, following which he had been entertained at her apartment, and they had met at the homes of mutual friends, but Montagu had been conscious always of an undercurrent of distrust on her part which he was at a loss to account for. The fact that he was an intimate friend of her son did not bridge the chasm and, except for occasional friendly chats with Bobby, he had little intercourse with Laughton's mother.

Montagu consulted his watch in doubt, then rose, and after a brief word with Foster left the Chancery and boarded an up-town street car. It was on the stroke of ten when he walked up the steps of his uncle's residence in Hillyer Place and inserted his latch key in the front door. The windows and blinds on the first floor were closed and Montagu, coming from the bright sun-lit street, paused until his eyes adjusted themselves to the semidarkness. Like many big men, he was light on his feet, and his entrance had been practically noiseless, while the opening and closing of the front door had been drowned by the efforts of a delivery driver to start his Ford parked before the house.

Montagu had spent several months with his uncle and the familiar sight of the hat stand in the hall, on which hung Burton's overcoat and several pieces of headgear, was a mute reminder of the dead man. Suddenly awakening to the fact that he had been standing in the hall for fully five minutes absorbed in thought, the Englishman looked into the parlor and then into the dining room; no one was in either place, and he was on the point of opening the door of the back stairs and going in search of his uncle's man-servant when he heard that worthy's voice on the floor above.

The stairs were carpeted, and Montagu's light tread was unheard as he went up to the second floor and across the hall in the direction of the voice. The house, built some twenty years before, when land was comparatively inexpensive, had a wide frontage, and next to the bedroom occupied by Burton was a large library. A gilt mirror, which partly covered the west wall, was directly opposite the doorway and Montagu caught a glimpse of the man he sought standing by the bay window facing two men, seated, one on either side of a table. Montagu was about to make his presence known when the sense of what the servant was saying arrested the words on his lips.

"Sir Gilbert was 'ere near midnight," Simpson stated, turning so as to face Inspector Mitchell

directly. "'E arsked me for the marster, and said 'e 'ad an hengagement with 'im. When told 'e was hout, Sir Gilbert sat about for an 'our or more."

"Well, what then?" inquired Mitchell, as the man stopped and looked uneasily at him.

"Hi was in yonder putting Mr. Burton's room .o rights, and Sir Gilbert came in," went on Simpson, with provoking deliberation of speech. "'E arsked me to shave 'im."

"Why?"

"'E didn't say, sir," simply. "I'm a gentleman's body-servant and 'ave often valeted Sir Gilbert when 'e lived 'ere with his uncle, and in 'arf an 'our, Sir Gilbert was clean-shaven. 'E left himmejetly hafterwards."

"Where did he go?" asked Mitchell, watching Simpson closely.

The servant shook his head. "'E didn't say, sir. Hi went to bed directly hafterwards. Detective Doyle told me the dreadful news, sir, hearly this morning. Hit's been a great shock, sir." Simpson passed one moist palm over the other and lapsed into silence.

Mitchell consulted his notes. "Have you any idea where Mr. Burton spent last night?" he asked.

Again Simpson shook his head. "Only that 'e 'ad an appointment with a lidy," he said, and at his words Montagu, who had moved slightly to one side

of the open door so as not to be seen by those in the library, drew in his breath sharply. "Mr. Burton wished me to horder some medicine from the chemist's shop, hand 'e wrote the name on a slip of paper which 'e tore off a note which 'e 'ad in his pocket." Simpson drew a much-folded strip of paper, which had once been white, from his vest pocket and handed it to Mitchell.

"Good quality of notepaper," the latter said to his companion and spread it out carefully on the table so that both could read it. Mitchell repeated the disconnected sentences on the jaggedly torn paper, as he pointed to each one with his pencil:

see you
to-night
apartment
L.

"Hit's a lidy's writing," declared Simpson, peering excitedly at them. "Don't you think so, Mr. Lewis?"

The lawyer pursed his lips. "It would seem so, Simpson," he agreed cautiously. "A handwriting expert would know. Too bad, Inspector, that the signature is missing, leaving only an initial."

A grunt was Mitchell's only answer. Turning the paper over he stared at the words, scrawled unevenly on the reverse side: "Hexamethelenamine 5gr. tablets."

"Did you get the medicine, Simpson?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; the box is on Mr. Burton's bedstand. Shall Hi get it, sir?" and Simpson took a step toward the door.

"No." Mitchell folded the paper and put it carefully in his leather wallet. "Who among Mr. Burton's lady friends have names with the initial 'L,' Simpson?"

"First name or last name, sir?" asked Simpson promptly.

"Either," replied Mitchell, and picked up his pencil.

Simpson rubbed his chin reflectively. "There's Miss Lily Mason," he began; "and Mrs. Sam Long, Mrs. Emma Latrobe; Miss Sally Lieber, Mrs. Philip Lowndes—that's hall Hi can think of now, sir."

"Think again, Simpson," directed Mitchell, and at his tone the man moved uneasily.

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir, there's Mrs. Laughton—both of 'em; the one in whose apartment he died, and the younger," again Simpson rubbed one palm over the other. "But neither of them 'as ever been 'ere, sir; like those Hi just mentioned. Miss Lily Mason, now," he paused. "Some while back Mr. Burton let on before me that 'e planned to marry 'er," he said, "and later 'e refused to see 'er and wouldn't talk to 'er on the 'phone as late as last week."

"Ah! And where does Miss Lily Mason live?"

"She has an apartment just under Mrs. Rutherford Laughton, sir," replied Simpson and paused dramatically to watch the effect of his statement.

The two men exchanged startled glances as the grandfather clock in the corner chimed the half hour. Mitchell started to speak, then thought better of it.

"Sir Gilbert Montagu will be here shortly," he said after a pause. "Are you sure the front bell hasn't rung, Simpson?"

Montagu waited to hear no more. Swiftly, noiselessly he disappeared out of the room and down the staircase; evidently the servant had forgotten that his uncle had given him a latch key. Undetected he gained the front vestibule and closed the door behind him. A glance up and down the single block which was the extent of Hillyer Place, showed him that it was empty, while the house directly across the narrow street bore the sign, "For Rent."

Montagu adjusted his monocle, pressed the doorbell, and leaning nonchalantly on his cane, awaited the coming of Simpson.

CHAPTER XIV

SUSPICION

WITH a promptness which suggested a race down the staircase on the part of Simpson, the door of the house in Hillyer Place swung inward and the servant bowed gravely as Sir Gilbert Montagu stepped across the threshold. Simpson, a tall man with light hair and almost imperceptible eyebrows, looked more cadaverous than usual owing to the tight fit of his black clothes and his solemn countenance.

"Hit's very shocking, Sir Gilbert," he said. "Monday, Mr. Burton in such 'igh spirits, and now to-day he lies in the morgue. . . ."

"My uncle is not there, Simpson," sternly. "His body was taken to the undertaker's chapel. The funeral will be held immediately after the inquest to-morrow, and interment will take place in Oak Hill Cemetery."

"Yes, sir." Simpson bowed deferentially. "Don't go in the parlor, sir, they are waiting for you hupstairs in the library."

"They? Who?" pausing in the doorway and regarding the servant steadily.

"Mr. Lewis, sir, your uncle's lawyer, and Inspector Mitchell. Shall Hi announce you, Sir Gilbert?"

"It's not necessary." Handing his cane and hat to Simpson, Montagu slowly mounted the staircase conscious that the former was standing in the hall looking at him with a curious gleam in his little swinish eyes.

Inspector Mitchell and the lawyer both rose as Montagu joined them.

"I am glad you got here, Sir Gilbert," Mitchell stated as Montagu shook hands with Lewis. "Suppose we sit down by this table," pulling out a chair as he spoke. "Mr. Lewis is executor of your uncle's will, and as such I have asked him to go over the contents of this house and your uncle's papers in my presence."

"They are here," broke in Lewis, pointing to a neat pile of documents lying on one side of the table. "Ordinarily your uncle, Sir Gilbert, kept his will in his safe-deposit box, but on Monday of this week, to be exact, Monday morning, he appeared in my office and in my absence left it with my chief clerk, a trustworthy person, who, in your uncle's presence, locked the document up in my safe. As you see, the envelope is addressed in your uncle's handwriting and the seals are unbroken," turning it over to corroborate each point as he brought it out.

"Is it customary in the United States to read a

will before the testator is buried?" asked Montagu quickly, and Inspector Mitchell answered for the lawyer.

"It is not generally done," he admitted. "But your uncle was foully murdered by a party or parties unknown, and in view of the fact that his will might give us a clue in unraveling the mystery, I have asked Mr. Lewis to waive the customary procedure and read it to us. That is why I wished you present so urgently this morning, Sir Gilbert." He eyed the Englishman keenly. "You have no objection, I presume?"

Montagu leaned forward. "As a matter of fact, I have," he said, and at his words the lawyer laid down a letter-opener and stared at him.

"Why do you wish to retard justice?" demanded Mitchell, giving Montagu no chance to say more.

"I have no such wish," quietly, meeting Mitchell's eyes unflinchingly. "I fail, however, to see what my uncle's will has to do with his untimely and most unhappy death. Frankly, gentlemen, I feel that to read my uncle's will before he is buried is disrespectful to his memory and, therefore, highly improper."

The lawyer sat back in his chair and exchanged glances with Mitchell. "I am sorry you take that attitude, Sir Gilbert," he said gravely. "Under ordinary conditions, I would be the last to advocate

anything which would seem disrespectful to my old friend; but considering his cold-blooded murder less than twenty-four hours after he had called at my office to *alter* his will, I agree with Inspector Mitchell that the disposition of his property should be known."

"Just so," declared Mitchell with energy, catching Montagu's startled expression. "Your uncle decides to alter his will, but before he can do so, he is killed. What do you make of that, Sir Gilbert?"

Montagu twirled his monocle, his eyes fixed on the sealed envelope lying in front of the lawyer. Suddenly he looked across at Mitchell, his expression inscrutable.

"There is much I do not understand," he said simply. "I withdraw my objections, Mr. Lewis; will you read the will?"

The lawyer wasted no words; picking up the steel letter opener, he slit the envelope and drew out its contents and spread the papers before him and, in a voice audible only to those in the room, read Clifford Burton's last will and testament. There was a brief silence when he finished. Laying down the paper he addressed Montagu.

"Your uncle has left everything to you, unconditionally," he said. "You are his only heir."

Montagu bowed his head. "It would appear so," he agreed, and paused to clear his throat. "I am his nearest relation, and Uncle Clifford was keen on

family ties—he believed that blood was thicker than water."

"That is true," volunteered Lewis as Mitchell started to speak. "Your uncle, Sir Gilbert, was of a quarrelsome nature, but he did not harbor grudges for long."

"Just a moment," broke in Mitchell, planting both elbows on the table as he leaned forward. "What was his grudge against you, Sir Gilbert, that he wished to change his will on Monday last?"

Montagu received the direct question with unruffled composure.

"We have had a number of disagreements," he admitted quietly. "Which one of them was of serious enough import to constitute a grudge is hard to say; for instance," gazing blandly at the inspector, whose ire was rapidly rising, "Uncle Clifford objected to my wearing a beard and mustache as being un-American," he paused and touched his clean-shaven face significantly. "Simpson, my uncle's servant, shaved me late Monday evening while I was awaiting my uncle's return here."

"Ah, you had it done to placate Mr. Burton?" asked Mitchell swiftly.

"No, I did not attach as much importance to it as that," with an ironical smile. "Purely a whim on my part, and Simpson's surprise and—eh—displeasure at the unexpected order, repaid me, inciden-

tally," keeping his countenance unmoved with difficulty as he met Mitchell's disgusted glance. "The change improves my appearance—eh—what?"

"It alters it materially," remarked the lawyer gravely. "I should not have known you at first glance, Sir Gilbert."

"What were your other disputes with your uncle?" demanded Mitchell, making quiet note of Lewis' remark for future reference. "Were they about women?"

"Sometimes." Montagu ceased playing with his monocle and inserted it in his eye.

"Cherchez la femme," quoted the lawyer, to Mitchell's manifest annoyance. "Women played a large part in Burton's life; I wonder that he did not marry." Then with dry emphasis, "You would have been out of luck if he had, Sir Gilbert."

For the first time Montagu changed color. "My uncle was free to leave his money to whom he wished," he said. "He was also free to marry."

"Without consulting *your* wishes?" interpolated Lewis, sarcastically. "There is no occasion to lose your temper, Sir Gilbert," catching an ominous gleam in Montagu's eye. "I was in your uncle's confidence, and he told me of your objections to his attentions to—" the lawyer paused as, under shelter of the table, Mitchell's shoe came in sharp contact with his shin bone. With difficulty Lewis

smothered a groan of anguish under a cough—"different women," he ended feebly.

Montagu's strong fingers touched the table ornaments absently as he regarded his two companions, his thoughts masked from their keen vision by an immovable countenance.

"Different women," he repeated. "Why not specify them by name, Mr. Lewis?" and the disdain in his voice stung the lawyer. He had no liking for the Englishman; a fancied slight early in their acquaintance had been magnified by a warped nature into a major offense.

A life-long friend and one-time partner of Clifford Burton, Lewis had anticipated a bequest, however small, in the latter's will, and his disappointment was proportionately keen. Not to be remembered even with a keepsake! Lewis forgot Mitchell's caution, forgot the wisdom of holding his tongue and gave full vent to his spleen.

"I have in mind," he began smoothly, "your uncle's attentions to Penelope Laughton, his client, and—eh—" an expressive shrug completed the sentence.

"My friend," supplemented Montagu, and his voice was under perfect control. "You will not again allude to her without the prefix 'Mrs.'"

"*Mrs.* Laughton, if you prefer it," Lewis' rage was mounting and Inspector Mitchell's efforts to

attract his attention were unavailing. "Burton confided to me that they plotted to be married when she was granted a divorce."

"That I know to be a lie." Montagu's voice rang out clearly and Simpson, within earshot in the connecting room, grimaced at his own reflection in the mirror over the bureau.

"Sir Gilbert!" Lewis was on his feet, his face livid. "You take advantage of your youth and your size."

"On the contrary, it is your age which protects you," declared Montagu swiftly. "If you were a younger man and my equal in strength, I'd kill you."

"As you did your uncle!" Lewis, shaking with rage, pointed a trembling finger at Montagu. "Why don't you arrest him, Inspector?"

"Yes, why not?" inquired Montagu. "Come, Inspector, I am waiting."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," protested Mitchell. "This scene has gone far enough. Mr. Lewis, please sit down."

"No." While Lewis' shrill, nasal voice came more under control, his rage remained at white heat, and he threw discretion to the winds. "Sir Gilbert knew his uncle planned to disinherit him; he knew Burton was to meet Mrs. Laughton clandestinely on Monday night in her mother-in-law's vacant apart-

ment, and he planned the murder, even to having himself shaved to prevent recognition." Lewis came to a dramatic pause. "There's your criminal, Inspector."

Mitchell's temper slipped its leash. "Either keep quiet or leave the room, Mr. Lewis," he ordered. "Sir Gilbert—"

"Oh, let him rave," Montagu's fine, white teeth showed in an expansive but fleeting smile. "Words are cheap, Inspector."

Mitchell shook his head. "Sir Gilbert, this is serious business," he began. "Mr. Lewis has made certain allegations which he must substantiate *now*," his voice deepening. "Come, sir, where is your proof that Sir Gilbert was in Mrs. Laughton's apartment on Monday night?"

Lewis sobered at the question. "That is for you to produce," he snarled, "in the person of Bobby Laughton."

Montagu tipped his chair forward on its front legs. "Ah, and what do you know of Bobby, Mr. Lewis?" he inquired.

The lawyer's smile was enigmatic; other than that he paid not the slightest attention to Montagu or his question. Gathering up his papers, he laid them and the will in front of Mitchell.

"I give these into your charge," he said. "Kindly sign this release; I had it drawn in my office as I did

not wish the responsibility of keeping Mr. Burton's will and other valuable documents in my possession. If you desire to question me further regarding any matters pertaining to Mr. Burton and his lady friends," with a sneering smile which made Montagu clench his fists, "I shall be glad to come to police headquarters." He waited until Mitchell handed him the signed receipt, then picked up his empty brief case, and not deigning to notice Montagu he bowed courteously to the inspector and left the room. At the door he would have halted, but Simpson stood waiting to usher him out, and with a quick, imperative sign to the servant to follow him, Lewis hurried down the staircase.

Tilting back in his chair Inspector Mitchell peered out of the open window into Hillyer Place and kept that position until he saw the lawyer's spare form disappear from view, then he resumed his customary pose and addressed his silent companion.

"Sir Gilbert," he said, lowering his voice so that it reached only Montagu's ears, "you are undoubtedly aware that your diplomatic position makes you immune from arrest."

Montagu nodded. "You will have to act through your Department of State," he replied quietly. "But, Inspector, accept a fool's advice and be very certain of your ground before you take such a step"; then

as Mitchell reddened, "Pardon me, I should not have said that."

Mitchell did not reply at once. Rising abruptly he crossed the library and closed the folding doors leading to Burton's bedroom and another that opened into the dead man's dressing room. When he came back Montagu was tying a shoe lace.

"You left my uncle's papers," the latter pointed out. "Hadn't you better count them?"

Mitchell sat down heavily and without investigating them, slipped an elastic band about the documents and placed them in the inside pocket of his coat.

"Sir Gilbert," he said, "I want your help."

"Ah, then you do not distrust me?"

"Had I done so, I would not have left your uncle's papers within your reach," dryly. "Sir Gilbert, when you told your uncle, 'If you compromise her, you will be killed,' did your 'her' refer to Miss Lily Mason?"

"No." Not by the flicker of an eyelash did Montagu betray his startled wonder at the question.

"Had you Mrs. Penelope Laughton in mind?" asked Mitchell relentlessly.

The pulse in Montagu's temple was beating with maddening speed but there was no hesitancy in his promptly spoken, "No."

Mitchell sat back in his chair and regarded Mon-

tagu from his highly polished shoes to his carefully brushed head. It was some minutes before he spoke.

"Sir Gilbert," he began, "there is no sense in disguising the fact that you are in a very delicate position. To sum up: you are known to have had disagreements with your uncle of so serious a nature that you left his house and rented an apartment in the Van Vleet; your uncle is stabbed to death before he alters his will, and you are found to be the sole heir; on the night of the murder you are shaved at a most unusual hour for such an operation, and your appearance somewhat changed thereby, the inference being for purposes of disguise; and you have never given the police a satisfactory account of where you spent the hours between Monday midnight and two o'clock on Tuesday morning."

Mitchell paused and lapsed into silence. The room had grown intolerably hot with the closing of the doors, and Montagu was conscious of perspiration trickling down his forehead. Would the keen-eyed inspector see it and put it down to emotion? Drawing out his handkerchief, Montagu deliberately wiped his forehead.

"Deuced hot!" he exclaimed. "Well, Inspector, you have drawn quite a case against me. Mr. Lewis would rejoice if he heard you."

"And so would the world if my summing up is

broadcasted," grimly. "It would be the ruin of your diplomatic career—Sir Gilbert Montagu, attaché of the British Embassy, branded as a murderer."

Montagu's heart contracted with sudden shock, then beat with suffocating rapidity. Inspector Mitchell had put the situation with brutal frankness. His honor at stake, even his life; and there was another dearer than life—Norma, his little sweetheart. Suppose she judged him by the world's verdict? For an instant the room turned black, and the inspector faded from view, then his head cleared and the pounding in his temples ceased.

"What have you done to locate Bobby Laughton?" he asked, and Mitchell started slightly at the unexpected question.

"A description of the boy has been sent to every precinct," he explained. "All patrolmen are on the lookout, and with the publicity given the lad's disappearance in the morning newspapers, Bobby is sure to be found before nightfall, provided he has not been kidnapped and taken out of the city."

"By whom?" quickly.

"The person most interested in his disappearance," Mitchell never took his eyes from Montagu. "Probably his mother."

Montagu shook his head. "Your theory won't hold water; Mrs. Laughton is still in Washington."

"In that case I am very likely wrong," responded

Mitchell. "The police will locate the boy, never fear," sarcastically, "but we do not have to wait for him to solve the murder—you can do that."

"You flatter me," grimly.

"By telling me frankly the relationship between Penelope Laughton and your uncle," went on Mitchell, paying not the slightest attention to Montagu's interruption.

"She was his client, and nothing more." The two men looked at each other in a lengthening silence. Suddenly Mitchell thrust his hand inside his pocket and drew out a folded strip of paper. He spread it on the table before Montagu, and the latter saw clearly the wavering lines:

see you
to-night
apartment
L.

"Isn't that Mrs. Penelope Laughton's handwriting?" he asked.

Montagu rose and buttoned his coat. "You have very ably pointed out that I am the criminal," he said deliberately. "Mr. Lewis, a prominent lawyer, shares your view, with the promise of producing proof against me. Shall I accompany you to the Department of State?"

In silence Mitchell pocketed the paper and rose also.

"I will not trouble you to go there now," he replied, "because I am convinced you are chivalrously shielding a woman, and that woman," he preceded Montagu to the folding doors and threw them open, "is Penelope Laughton. Good morning, Sir Gilbert," and with a low bow he ushered him to the staircase. Mitchell waited until convinced that the Englishman had left the house and then retraced his steps to the library. He entered just as Detective Doyle stepped from behind a moderate-sized book-case, which stood cat-a-corner at one end of the room.

"You played Sir Gilbert well, Inspector," he exclaimed admiringly, careful, however, to keep his voice subdued. "The poor fish!"

CHAPTER XV

INNUENDOES

CONNECTICUT AVENUE, once the exclusive residential section of the capital city, but into which had crept first one shop and then another as the fashionable world forsook the shelter of its beautiful trees for more spacious land on Cathedral Heights and Massachusetts Avenue, was thronged with people, and Sir Gilbert Montagu stopped frequently to greet friends and acquaintances. The first of October generally brought back the "cave-dwellers" from their summer outings, but with the unexpectedly early return of the chief executive and the opening of the White House, the political world as well as the diplomatic representatives accredited to Washington, found it expedient to close their summer homes and again foregather in the national capital.

In spite of the balmy air and the brilliant sunshine, the world looked gray and cheerless to Gilbert Montagu, and it was with a motion almost mechanical that he raised his hat to bow to first one friend and then another. That the accounts of his uncle's sensational murder had been read was attested by

the many curious glances which followed his tall form, clad in well-cut, dark clothes, with a black band on the sleeve. Montagu was considering getting off Connecticut Avenue and continuing his stroll to the Washington Post Building on a less frequented street when he stopped at the curb to await the passage of an automobile. The moment's respite gave Boris Beloselsky an opportunity to overtake him.

"You wear the famed seven league boots, my friend," he said as Montagu turned at his hail. "Where away in such haste?"

"Nowhere in particular," was Montagu's evasive reply, but the Russian seemed blind to his lack of cordiality, and suiting his step to his, continued by his side down the avenue, chatting agreeably on first one topic and then another. Beloselsky could be amusing when he exerted himself and Montagu's reserve thawed somewhat as they reached Seventeenth and H Streets. He was about to make his excuses and board a down-town street car when Beloselsky caught sight of a smart roadster which swung through traffic as Penelope Laughton turned the steering wheel with the skill of a practiced driver. Attracted by Beloselsky's exclamation, Montagu turned in time to see the roadster vanish up H Street, headed due west, and to recognize Norma Page sitting by her cousin's side. There was no possibility of catching them, no taxi was in sight

and that part of H Street was without a car track. Montagu smothered his disappointment, his plan of seeing Norma at the office of the Washington *Post* was futile now. He had called the office from a telephone booth in a drug store at Dupont Circle, and left a message for Norma asking her to wait for him. Evidently the message had been undelivered or else—Montagu bit his lip as he stood on the corner, his thoughts following the speeding roadster. For the moment he hated Penelope. She was where he wanted to be, by Norma's side. Was she always to block his happiness, to thwart him? Beloselsky touched him on the arm to attract his attention.

"You must lunch somewhere, Sir Gilbert, why not with me?" he asked, and pointed with his walking stick to the big brick building on their left. "Come into the club and," with uncanny insight into the Englishman's carefully covered aversion to meeting casual acquaintances and listening to their maladroit references to Burton's murder, "you will find privacy there."

What he said was true. Montagu knew few members were to be found in the Metropolitan Club at noon, and those who might be there would have the tact to leave him alone.

The Russian read his changed expression aright and turning, silently accompanied him inside the club and up to the dining room floor. Beloselsky

selected a table in one of the corner windows overlooking Seventeenth and H Streets. It was cooler there, and no other tables in the vicinity were occupied. Montagu's healthy appetite was unimpaired by his harassed thoughts and while his host forebore to address him, he saw that the Englishman was bountifully served. Half an hour later as the steward cleared the table and brought coffee and cheese, Montagu roused himself from his abstraction.

"You are very good, Beloselsky," he said apologetically. "I am poor company—"

"Not so," declared the Russian with a kindly glance. "I, myself, am not too cheerful. However, it is not wise for men to dine alone when downcast. I would that I could offer you a liqueur."

"I am better off without it." Montagu squared his broad shoulders; his head had ceased aching, and the tobacco soothed him. He knocked the ashes from his excellent cigar, which Beloselsky had ordered with discriminating taste, and sat back more at ease. A glance at his wristwatch showed him that it was approaching one; in a few hours he would again be with Norma—she would surely keep her dinner engagement with him! Lighter hearted at the thought than he had been for many weary hours, Montagu looked across at his companion.

"Where is Nelson Thorpe?" he asked. "I usually see you together."

Beloselsky stroked his pointed mustache. "He has grown unsociable with the return of Penelope Laughton," he stated simply. "What think you: will she marry him when free to do so?"

The question acted like a douche of cold water, and it required all Montagu's self-control not to betray his surprise. "I have given the matter no thought," he admitted quietly. "In fact, I had no idea Thorpe was interested in that quarter. What makes you think so?"

"We were together in a house party upon his return to America this summer," Beloselsky explained, between puffs at his cigar. "Thorpe became much enamored; so much so that gossip started." The Russian paused and laid down his cigar. "Mrs. Laughton can be very fascinating to a man of his stamp. What did you say?" as Montagu's strong white teeth came together with a distinct click.

"Nothing," he protested. "I did not mean to interrupt you." He looked out of the window for a second and then back at his companion. "So you think Thorpe more than ordinarily interested in Mrs. Laughton?"

"But yes;" with the slightest trace of foreign accent. "How far Mrs. Laughton's affections are engaged I do not know," he paused for comment from Montagu, but the latter sat staring straight

ahead, and finally the Russian added thoughtfully, "I sometimes wonder if Mrs. Laughton is not a modern Undine—completely without soul."

"Without sense!" declared Montagu, in sudden ungovernable disgust. "Imagine a woman with such a husband as Tom Laughton, a fine, honorable chap, putting up with the attentions of a man of Thorpe's caliber!"

Beloselsky nodded. "She is what you call treading on thin ice," he commented softly. "Nelson Thorpe is of inflammable material; let him but think she is playing with him, and pouf!" He demonstrated his meaning with a snap of his fingers. "The fat will be genuinely in the fire."

Montagu's thoughts had turned to Thomas Laughton, and he scarcely heard Beloselsky's comment. In their years together he had gained an insight into Laughton's unshaken devotion to the woman who bore the honored name of wife. And now they were once again in Washington, once again under the same roof, with the thin width of apartment walls between them, but separated by an ever-widening gulf of unhappiness, misunderstanding, and, God help them, suspicion.

"She is playing with fire!" exclaimed Montagu, and started guiltily; he had inadvertently voiced his thoughts aloud.

"Indeed, yes," agreed Beloselsky, relighting his

cigar. "And in other ways," he blew out the match and tossed it down. "Can you not warn Mrs. Laughton through her cousin, Miss Page?"

"Warn her? Of what?" Montagu was instantly on his guard.

Beloselsky's keen glance betrayed surprise. "Are you not aware that Penelope Laughton is a 'parlor pink'?" he asked, and the gravity of his tone impressed Montagu. "Have you not heard her express her views on socialism?"

"Not to any marked degree, but then," reflectively, "I was called away from Washington before she left for the summer."

"She has grown more outspoken," went on Beloselsky. "The agents of my unhappy country find a fertile field in the United States among the idle women. I suppose," with a cynical lift of his shoulders, "they must have something new, even dangerous, as *sauce piquante,* and so listen to the doctrines preached by the Communists."

Montagu carefully polished his monocle before putting it back in his eye. "We outsiders see most of the game," he said thoughtfully. "It is evident that communist propaganda in the United States is the overwhelmingly chief reason for the government's refusal to recognize soviet Russia."

"Congress will do so, however," retorted Beloselsky bitterly. "Touch an American pocketbook," he

shrugged his shoulders. "Germany foolishly destroyed American commerce, and America declared war upon her."

"Rot!" declared the Englishman with vigor.

"Ah, no. But of course, you Anglo-Saxons stand up for each other." Beloselsky laughed softly. "Listen to me, my friend, the merchants and manufacturers of the United States wish trade with Russia, and their views will be listened to by the men on Capitol Hill."

"Listened to, perhaps, but not acted upon favorably," replied Montagu stoutly. "I have followed the situation closely, Beloselsky, as have all in the diplomatic world. Mark my words, until the active spirit of enmity to American institutions ceases, there will be no recognition of the present government in Russia."

Again Beloselsky laughed. "Perhaps not immediately," he admitted. "But it appears certain that a trade agreement with the United States is imminent. You think not?" as Montagu shook his head in polite disagreement.

"Without an agreement Americans are selling constantly growing quantities of goods of all kinds to Russians," the latter replied. "The United States is, in reality, at the present moment doing more business with Russia than several European nations which have such trade agreements."

Beloselsky considered the Englishman in silence for a moment.

"If what you say is true," he began, adding hurriedly, "and I have no doubt that it is, as in your official capacity you are in complete touch with the situation, whereas I am out of accord with the unofficial representatives of my country in Washington, I fail to understand Moscow's feverish, not to say frantic, desire for a trade agreement with the United States."

Montagu scrutinized his companion thoughtfully. Beloselsky was nobody's fool. Why was he claiming ignorance on a subject that was common talk in diplomatic circles? Was he being "drawn" by the wily Russian? And if so, with what object?

"Because such an agreement would be considered an act of approval of soviet government by the administration here in Washington," he answered dryly. "It would be hailed far and wide as the first step toward recognition by the United States." Montagu paused and put down his cigar stub. "I have not been long in Washington," he added, "but I am fortunate to count among my friends many Americans, and I am convinced," his voice deepening, "that the President of the United States will never sanction diplomatic relations with a foreign régime bent upon undermining American ideals of government."

Beloselsky folded his napkin with precision and laid it on the table. "It is good to hear such sentiments so forcefully put," he declared heartily. "I am glad to be reassured; it would be a world calamity to see another country wrecked as is Russia to-day." His voice grew husky. "The Reign of Terror in France was nothing as compared to what transpired in Russia, my friend, when the peasants rose against the Czar. Lenine and Trotsky—ah, their names should be damned throughout the ages."

"Do not fear, history will give them their just deserts," responded Montagu. "I must be running along, Beloselsky," with a glance at his watch. "Thanks very much for your hospitality."

"Not a word, my dear friend." Beloselsky clapped him on the shoulder familiarly. "Is Bobby Laughton with his father or his mother?"

"Neither."

"What? Then the story of his disappearance in the *Post* is not a newspaper exaggeration?" Beloselsky's voice conveyed lively interest. "A remarkable boy; I sincerely trust no harm has come to him."

"Ah, then you knew Bobby?"

"Surely; his grandmother has been kindness itself to me, and I have enjoyed many delightful hours in her apartment." The Russian stopped abruptly as an acquaintance hailed him. He tried to pass the latter's table with a polite bow, but the other per-

sisted in his endeavor to talk to Beloselsky and with a low-spoken excuse, he left Montagu.

The Englishman did not tarry. Brushing by several who would have detained him in conversation, he avoided the elevator and instead hurried down the staircase and out of the club. His talk with Beloselsky had given him food for thought. Could it be that Penelope Laughton was seriously considering divorcing her husband, and if so, in heaven's name, upon what grounds? Would she top that folly by marrying Nelson Thorpe? Montagu struck viciously at an orange peel lying on the sidewalk and sent it into the gutter, then swinging his cane he hastened into Sixteenth Street and turned in the direction of the Van Vleet. His thoughts, however, were still centered on Penelope Laughton. Beloselsky had said she had become a parlor socialist —he had heard of such fools before! Pshaw, why worry his brains over Penelope? Beloselsky had but confirmed his opinion of her, and there was no reason to doubt his estimate; no one could have been more suave or apparently cordial than his host at luncheon.

Montagu whirled on his heel as a shrill voice sounded in his ear.

"Pardon, m'sieur!" panted Celeste, one hand on her rapidly beating heart. "I run ze block for you. Madame Laughton would speak wiz you," and she

pointed toward the opposite curb where a limousine stood waiting.

The chauffeur held the door open when Montagu paused by the car, and Mrs. Laughton motioned to him to enter it.

"Can I take you anywhere, Sir Gilbert?" she asked.

"Thanks," and Montagu sprang inside. "If you will run me up to the Van Vleet, I shall be most grateful. I am on my way to join Tom."

"But he is not there," she broke in. "I understood he was lunching with you, or so the clerk at the Van Vleet inferred."

"He was mistaken." Montagu tucked his long legs out of the way as Celeste entered the limousine and occupied one of the folding seats. "I left Tom in bed." Noting Mrs. Laughton's startled expression, he added hastily, "Your son was not ill, only utterly weary after his fruitless search for Bobby."

Mrs. Laughton's lips closed in a hard line and her eyes snapped.

"Bobby's behavior is outrageous," she declared. "I will never forgive him for this escapade, never. He deserves corporal punishment of the most severe type."

Montagu studied the angry woman in silence. Was it possible that she felt no alarm for the boy's

safety? Could she think that his protracted absence was simply a boy's prank?

"I was hoping that you would tell me Bobby had returned," he said gravely. "The situation is becoming serious—"

Mrs. Laughton gave him no opportunity to complete his sentence. Leaning toward him as the limousine continued up Sixteenth Street, she asked in a voice meant only for him but which was partly audible to Celeste, "Have the police searched Penelope Laughton's apartment for Bobby?"

"No, Mrs. Laughton." Montagu was conscious of a feeling of repugnance—was the woman utterly heartless, or was her callous attitude but the result of her hatred of her daughter-in-law, a hatred apparently passed on to the latter's son? "Last night Tom went to see his wife—" He got no further, for at his words Mrs. Laughton turned ghastly and sank back in the car. Celeste, who appeared to have eyes in the back of her head, swung around and produced with lightning speed a small phial from her handbag. She clapped it to Mrs. Laughton's lips and held it until the medicine was swallowed.

"If m'sieur will excuse," she said, turning to Montagu, who was looking at Mrs. Laughton with alarm. "We will leave him here and return at once to madame's apartment."

"Don't you need assistance?" asked Montagu, as the car stopped in front of the Van Vleet, and the doorman appeared at his elbow. "Hadn't I better get a doctor?"

"*Non, non,* m'sieur!" Celeste emphasized her words with vigorous bobs of her head. "Madame is bettaire, even now, see—"

The maid appeared to be right; there was more color in Mrs. Laughton's cheeks, and her eyes had regained their intelligence. She nodded feebly to Montagu.

"Don't wait," she gasped. "I will be all right. Come—to-night. Tell John, home," and leaning against Celeste's supporting arm, she dropped her head on her shoulder.

Montagu was so engrossed in watching the Laughton limousine out of sight that he failed to observe a man leave a car, in which he had borrowed a ride, and approach him.

"Afternoon, Sir Gilbert," and Detective Doyle halted by him. "I have some news for you."

"Ah, indeed?" viewing the detective with quickening interest. "Have you located Bobby Laughton?"

"No, sir; but almost as good."

"I fail to understand you," broke in Montagu as Doyle paused.

"Excuse me," Doyle never took his eyes from

Montagu; "I meant we've found the black boy, Joe." Then observing Montagu's blank expression, he added, "The boy that ran the elevator in the Laughton apartment house the night your uncle was killed."

CHAPTER XVI

THE MENDED PILLOW

"ANY telephone calls, Susie?" Norma's clear young voice startled the maid into wakefulness, and the Persian cat, which had slept peacefully in her lap while she dozed in comfort in a rocker in the servants' sitting room, was hastily dropped on the floor. Clapping her white cap on her head, Susie paused but a second to see that it was properly adjusted and then hurried into the hall to meet her mistress and Norma.

"There was one for you, Miss Norma," she explained, picking up, as she passed the telephone stand a pad bearing writing, and refreshing her memory with a glance at it. "Mr. Manning asked you to call him up at the *Post* the moment you came in. No, ma'am," meeting Penelope's anxious eyes. "There's been no word about Master Bobby."

Without comment Penelope brushed by Susie and Norma and went straight to her room and closed the door.

"Did you see her face, miss?" Susie drew closer to Norma and spoke in an awed whisper. "The poor madam! Go in and comfort her, miss."

"I will in a minute. Don't push me, Susie," as the maid, her sympathies at fever heat, gave Norma a gentle shove. "It's best to let Mrs. Laughton be alone; she can't bear to have any one see her give way to emotion. She's proud, you know, and very sensitive."

" 'Deed, don't I know it," Susie spoke with deep feeling; Penelope had the faculty of winning the affection of her servants. "I'd like to tar and feather those that hurt her, and especially that there old cat," and Susie shook a fist in the direction of the apartment occupied by Mrs. Rutherford Laughton. "She's an evil-minded old shrew!"

"Good gracious, Susie!" Norma, taken aback by the maid's vehemence, actually jumped. Her exclamation, however, did not stem the tide of Susie's wrath.

"And that there Celeste," she went on. "That French flipperty-jibbit! She don't put nothing over on me; I've seen her a-signaling men from the pantry window and beckoning 'em to climb the fire-escape. Indecent, I calls it!" and Susie wagged a shocked head in confirmation of her statement. "Poor Master Bobby! I don't wonder he ran away; the surprising part is he didn't do it afore."

"I wish he hadn't taken this occasion," sighed Norma. "Listen, Susie, make some appetizing sandwiches and coffee and bring them into the boudoir;

I couldn't persuade Mrs. Laughton to eat any lunch, and we've been driving around and around the city and vicinity ever since noon in the hope of seeing Bobby."

"Very well, miss; I'll just telephone to the café to send up something tasty," and Susie, relieved that her pent-up indignation might find vent in serving Penelope, hastened into her own domain, while Norma sought her bedroom.

As Norma tossed her hat and gloves on the bed, she caught sight of a florist's box. In an instant the top was off and her face was buried in fragrant violets; there was no need to look at the accompanying card, Norma's dancing heart supplied the donor's name. For the moment her happiness banished all thought of Penelope, and she spent the next ten minutes rearranging her hair, blown by the wind, and putting on a fresh gown. There was just a possibility that Montagu might call! Anyway she was to see him at dinner, and it was now nearly four o'clock.

Norma found Penelope seated at her writing table in her boudoir.

"Have you rung up the *Post*?" she asked. "No? Then do it now," pointing to the branch telephone by the lounge.

"Won't I disturb you, Pen?"

"No." Without turning her head, her cousin

continued her search for a missing memorandum. "Ask your friend if the paper has any news of Bobby, will you, dear?"

Penelope followed Norma's long talk with "Pop" Manning with almost painful attention, while her fingers thumbed a notebook in feverish haste; she tossed it aside and sat back wearily as Susie entered and placed a tray on the table in front of her. With a word of thanks she assisted the maid in arranging the coffee cups and saucers.

"I see your hand in this, Norma," she said, as the young girl dropped down in a chair near her. "You always think of something nice for others."

Norma flushed; a word of praise from Penelope delighted her.

"They have no news," she said. "Don't lose hope, Pen; Bobby must turn up soon, and," hastily, in her endeavor to bring consolation, "it isn't so very long that he has—has—"

"Disappeared," as her cousin faltered.

"Yes. Bobby was here yesterday morning—he's been away from home a little over twenty-four hours."

"Is that all—it has seemed an eternity since I learned that he was missing!" Penelope drew in her breath and let it out slowly. Rouge and powder, skillfully applied, had removed all trace of tears; only her reddened lids spoke of bitter grief. She

tried a sandwich and put it down. "I can't swallow it, Norma; just think, Bobby may be starving."

"Not if I know Bobby," declared Norma stoutly. "If anything, he's suffering from overeating. Pen, you mustn't bury him," observing two large tears rolling down her cousin's cheeks. "Bobby is all right, I tell you—it's—it's my premonition, and it's *never* wrong."

Penelope's soft smile was pathetic in its fleetness. "I wish I shared your assurance," she said wistfully. "What else did Mr. Manning say, Norma? I saw you making notes; was it for another assignment? I thought the managing editor had given you leave for another week?"

"So he has," hastily. "Mr. Manning wants a Sunday special on parlor socialists in Washington. I'm looking to you," with a mischievous smile, "to supply copy. Isn't that your favorite indoor sport, Pen?"

"I—" Penelope filled her coffee cup and drank it thirstily. "I'll tell you what I can, Norma; but remember, my name mustn't appear." And as Norma nodded an eager assent. "When must you have the story completed?"

"Friday night."

"Then there is no hurry." Penelope pushed back her chair and rose; she had come to a sudden resolution. A creature of impulse, she seldom paused to consider what might be the outcome of her acts. "I

am going to call on my mother-in-law," she announced gravely.

Norma stared at her in open-mouthed astonishment. If her cousin had stated that she contemplated a trip to the North Pole, she would have been less thunderstruck. "You are going to call on Mrs. Rutherford Laughton?" she gasped. "You are joking, Pen."

"No." Penelope was halfway to her bedroom, unbuttoning her gown as she spoke. "Will you come with me?"

"Of course," with gratifying promptness, and as Norma adjusted her brain to the startling proposal, her sense of fun got the upper hand. "Oh, to see Mrs. Laughton's face when you walk into her apartment!" She followed Penelope into the next room and watched her select a dress with Susie's assistance. "What is taking you there, Pen?"

Penelope paused in the act of taking down her hair. "I go to seek Bobby," she said. "Come, Susie, and arrange my hair."

Mrs. Rutherford Laughton took some small change out of her purse and handed it to Celeste.

"That will pay for the advertisement," she said. "After you have attended to that, Celeste, go to Cornwall's and get some alligator pears for salad; my son is very fond of them; also buy a pound of chocolates. Did you tell John to wait?"

"*Oui,* madame; he is below stairs with the limousine."

"Then go in it; and hurry back, I do not like to be alone," with an involuntary glance about her bedroom. "Hark, is that the front doorbell? Perhaps it is Commander Laughton or a note from him; but, Celeste, one moment," and the maid stopped in the doorway. "I cannot see ordinary visitors; say that I beg to be excused."

"*Oui,* madame," and Celeste vanished down the hallway, to return in a few minutes. "Señor Lopez desires a word with you, madame."

"Ah, indeed!" Mrs. Laughton's expression brightened. "I will keep him here while you are away. Go, Celeste; do not waste further time. Say to Señor Lopez that I will join him in a few minutes."

Mrs. Laughton's tone did not brook delay, and Celeste, already dressed for the street, had no excuse to linger. There were occasions when the maid dared to provoke her anger, but this was not one of them, and it was with a rebellious face that she preceded her down the hall. Mrs. Laughton waited until she saw the front door of her apartment close on Celeste's pretty figure, then went in search of Señor Lopez. Her glance into the dining room showed her that it was empty. She turned and with slow, reluctant feet walked into the library. Señor

Lopez rose at sight of her and bowed profoundly, then advancing, pulled forward her favorite chair.

"Have you news of Bobby?" she demanded, without further greeting; and her voice held a breathless note in it, which caught Lopez's unobtrusive attention. A negative shake of his head was his only answer, and Mrs. Laughton sat down heavily in her armchair.

"Where can that wretched boy be hiding?" she muttered, then bent forward and shook a long bony finger at the tutor; her hands, large and with joints swollen from rheumatism, were particularly ugly. "Señor Lopez, Bobby *must* be found, and without delay. Have you no suggestions to make?"

"I have searched everywhere, Mrs. Laughton," Lopez's graceful gesture conveyed sorrow and distress. "I would give much to find the boy before others, *much.*" Their glances crossed, and Mrs. Laughton was conscious of a sudden sense of chill which the mild atmosphere of the room did not account for. "I fear his father will not punish Bobby as he deserves."

"Quite true." Mrs. Laughton sighed softly; Lopez was a man after her own heart. "Commander Laughton is too often governed by affection where he should show no mercy. If you find the boy, bring him here at once, and—eh—permit me to notify his father."

"Certainly, Mrs. Laughton." Lopez considered her thoughtfully. He was unconscious of his prolonged stare until she moved restlessly.

"Have you no ideas to submit?" she asked. "Would it be advisable to offer a reward for Bobby?"

"His father has already done that, according to the afternoon papers," replied Lopez. "It has occurred to me, Mrs. Laughton, that possibly Bobby may have left a note, he was very fond of scribbling, or some line which might give us a clue to his present whereabouts. For instance, have you searched this room?"

"No; this is practically the first time I have been inside it since—since my return from Blue Ridge." Mrs. Laughton avoided his glance. "However, your suggestion has value; suppose you look around the room now."

Lopez needed no second bidding. With the deft swiftness which characterized all his motions he examined every article of furniture, and at the end dropped down on his hands and knees and looked into every corner and under the rugs. Slowly he got to his feet and dusting his hands one against the other, sat down on the large sofa, stretched across one corner of the room. It stood close to Mrs. Laughton's chair and directly facing her.

Mrs. Laughton watched him run his hands along the edge of the sofa where the back and the seat

cushions met. His efforts produced a little dust and nothing more. Picking up one of the smaller sofa pillows which he had inadvertently knocked to the floor, Lopez sat back and considered his next move. He was silent for so long a time that Mrs. Laughton waxed impatient.

"What is the matter?" she demanded ungraciously. "You've sat there staring at that pillow for more than five minutes. What is there about it to hypnotize you?"

"Pardon me!" Lopez's tone conveyed sincere apology. "This pillow is covered with such beautiful silk, I regret to see that it has been mended."

"Mended!" in astonishment. "Nothing of the sort, Señor Lopez. That is the pillow left me by my sister six months ago, and it was in perfect condition when I closed the apartment this summer. The silk is some my husband brought from China and cannot be duplicated in color or design."

"True, madam, and being somewhat of a connoisseur of oriental goods, I have greatly admired the pillow." Lopez touched it lightly with his finger tip. "I recall that in spite of the silk's age, it was, as you say, well preserved. But now—see for yourself," and he laid the pillow in her lap.

Mrs. Laughton paused to put on her glasses and then examined the pillow. The tutor was right; two holes had been neatly darned with silk which

toned in with the oriental color and to the casual glance would have passed unseen.

"Upon my word!" Mrs. Laughton stared at the pillow in angry displeasure. "Who has dared do such a thing? Who could do such a thing?" Then in rising crescendo, "Why, my apartment has been closed all summer—"

"But accessible to Clifford Burton and his murderer," Lopez pointed out thoughtfully.

Mrs. Laughton continued to stare at the pillow with eyes in which a trace of fear had found lodgement.

"I do not understand," she gasped. "What made the holes?"

"Cigarette ashes," suggested Lopez. "Some one has sat on the sofa and carelessly let them drop on the pillow."

"But I do not permit smoking in this room." Mrs. Laughton jumped to her feet and the pillow slipped from her grasp. "What is that noise?"

"Some one tapping on the front door." Lopez turned his head and listened. "Did not Celeste go out after I came in?"

Mrs. Laughton nodded her head absently as she reached for the pillow. "Yes. Please see who is there," and as Lopez sped noiselessly away, she held the pillow under the standing lamp at her elbow, and switched on the electric light.

"I know only one person who can darn like that," she exclaimed, under her breath. "Celeste."

Her absorption made her deaf to what was going on in the hall. Lopez had swung open the front door with an impatient hand and a desire to be back in the library. As his eyes fell on Penelope Laughton and Norma Page standing on the threshold, he was conscious of a distinct shock, and for once his ready wit forsook him. With a swift, graceful spring Penelope was inside the apartment, Norma immediately in her wake. Before the surprised tutor could speak, she smiled up at him.

"Thanks, Señor Lopez," and her soft soothing tone penetrated his confused mind. "Where will I find Mrs. Rutherford Laughton?"

"In the library." Lopez felt the appeal of her lovely eyes, and his own lit with smoldering admiration as he took in each detail of her charming costume. Penelope had held the attention of men too long not to know her power of fascination.

"Will you lead me there?" she asked; and, as he passed her with a low bow, "Thank you." Lopez missed Penelope's swift, warning glance at Norma, as the latter paused to make certain that the front door was securely closed; he was only conscious of the faint, delicate perfume she used and that she was a few feet behind him. Lopez pulled back the portières of the library with a keen sense of the

dramatic, but Penelope gave him no opportunity to pronounce her name. Walking quietly into the room, she stopped in front of her mother-in-law.

"Good afternoon," she said quietly. "It is some time since we have met."

The pillow dropped from Mrs. Laughton's nerveless fingers and she stared at her visitor for a moment bereft of speech. It was fully ten seconds before she found her voice.

"You!" she exclaimed. "Ah, it is like your effrontery to dare to come inside my apartment. Perhaps," with a glance of cunning and fury combined, "it is not the first time."

Penelope regarded her without a change of expression. "It is not my practice to thrust myself into other people's homes," she replied. "I have come to see my son."

"He is not here." Then, as she read Penelope's disbelief, Mrs. Laughton pointed triumphantly to Lopez. "Ask him, if you think I lie."

Lopez shook his head sorrowfully as Penelope glanced at him.

"Bobby has not returned," he added. "And no message has been received from him. I greatly fear," his oblique black eyes never leaving her face, "for his safety."

Penelope blanched, and one hand stole upward to her heart; her emotion was not lost on her

mother-in-law, and her lips twisted into a taunting smile.

"When you leave," she said, "you might visit the morgue."

The brutality of the words brought back Penelope's self-control, and she faced the older woman with flashing eyes.

"It was due to your concealed machinations that my home and happiness were wrecked," she said. "I could pardon my husband's belief in you, for you are his mother; but, so long as I live, I will never forgive him for leaving Bobby in your care."

"And why did Tom do it?" asked Mrs. Laughton, the hate of bitter jealousy making her voice harsh and rancorous. "Because you are a godless woman —you flout the church—" She would have added more, but Penelope's imperative gesture silenced her for a moment.

"The road heavenward has many paths," answered Penelope, simply. "I prefer to choose the one you do not tread." She glanced swiftly about the library. Lopez stood watching her in fascinated silence; apparently he had failed to notice that Norma had not entered the library with them, and Mrs. Rutherford Laughton was unaware of the girl's presence in the apartment. Could she hold their undivided attention for a brief time longer? She must—

A slight movement of the portières attracted

Penelope's attention; they parted, and Norma's face was framed for an instant between them; then a jerk of her head toward the front door, and she had vanished.

Penelope took a step toward the doorway and then paused and faced her mother-in-law.

"My instinct tells me that you do not wish Bobby found," she stated quietly. "I go from here—to the police."

Mrs. Laughton watched the slender, graceful figure slip through the portières, and if malevolent looks could injure, Penelope would never have reached her destination unscathed.

Norma, waiting patiently by the front door, bowed politely to Lopez as they passed into the corridor and turning went silently with Penelope to the elevator shaft. Except for themselves, the corridor was empty, and as Norma laid her finger on the push button to summon the elevator, she whispered in her cousin's ear:

"I searched every room in the apartment, and Bobby is not there."

CHAPTER XVII

THE HOUSE IN THE SUBURBS

PENELOPE LAUGHTON'S pretended interest in a book would have fooled no one but a pair of lovers. Norma and Gilbert Montagu, absorbed in each other, were entirely oblivious of the fact that she held the book upside down and that behind its sheltering covers her eyes were blinded with tears. She wiped them away and stole a look at her watch; over two hours had elapsed since dinner, which Susie had served in the apartment as Montagu, at Penelope's plea not to dine in public, had changed his plans and remained with them, instead of taking them to a restaurant. She had given them an hour to themselves, not to mention the time spent with Susie, that they might be entirely alone; surely they had said all that was to be said? Her nerves could no longer stand the strain of silence; she must talk, do something, anything to get away from her thoughts! The book slipped from her grasp and fell to the floor with a bang which made Norma jump, while her hand tightened its clasp of Montagu's, and then released it.

"Forgive me!" exclaimed Penelope, as Montagu

stooped over to pick up the book. "Does your watch say only half past nine o'clock?"

"Correct," replied Montagu, first verifying his statement. "I say, Mrs. Laughton, wouldn't you and Norma like to take a motor ride? A run in the night air might make you feel rested. Candidly," with a charming, boyish smile which robbed his words of any sense of criticism, "you look a bit fagged, you know."

"An excellent plan," chimed in Norma. "Come, Pen, perhaps the drive would make you sleep better."

But her cousin negatived the idea with a despondent shake of her head. "Besides," she added, "I don't like to leave the apartment, and no one here to answer the telephone in our absence. I might get word of Bobby; the police have promised—"

"I'll stay here, and you go with Gilbert," broke in Norma impetuously.

"And leave you alone? No, indeed!" Penelope bent forward and kissed the winsome face so near her own, for Norma, in her earnest endeavor to persuade her to follow Montagu's suggestion, had left her seat by his side and joined her cousin on the sofa. Penelope turned to Montagu, who, true to custom, had stationed himself in front of the fireplace and stood looking down at his two companions. "You are quite sure, Gilbert, that the private detective you engaged will report here?"

"I told him to," responded Montagu, genuinely pleased that she had dropped his title. She was Norma's cousin and the wife of the man he admired above all others, and—oh, dash it all, was he, like the rest, to fall a victim to her personal charm? Fight as he did against it, Montagu admitted to himself the magic of her smile. "Please do not worry, Mrs. Laughton; I assure you the city is being combed for Bobby. I say!" in a louder key, a sudden idea striking him. "What about driving down to police headquarters and inquiring in person?"

Penelope sighed. "Norma and I met every one there this afternoon, from office boy to superintendent," she answered; "not to mention the police commissioner. They all promised—" her gesture indicated a growing despair. "Perhaps later we will go with you. Tell me," in her earnestness, she raised herself from the sofa cushions, which Norma had placed solicitously at her back earlier in the evening. "When did you last see my husband?" and she made no effort to disguise the almost painful interest with which she awaited his answer.

Only once in their intercourse had she ever before mentioned Tom Laughton to Montagu, and that was in the early days of their acquaintance when she learned he had been attached to the British Embassy in Russia at the outbreak of the World War; she had then inquired if he had met her husband, serv-

ing as American Naval Attaché in the same city, and upon his simple statement that they were close friends, she had dropped the subject. Montagu respected her reticence. It was one thing in her favor that she did not take the world into her confidence. What manner of woman Tom Laughton had married, Montagu could not determine; there were times when he deemed her froth and bubble to the goblet's brim; there were others when he glimpsed a depth of feeling, of tenderness of soul in touch, alike, with joy or human suffering.

"Pen spoke to you, Gilbert," and the reproach in Norma's voice was unmistakable. "You have not answered her question, dear."

"Oh, I—forgive me!" Montagu thrust aside his thoughts and conjectures in some confusion. "I left Tom early this morning."

"Then he did not lunch with you?" broke in Norma. "I asked at the desk for Tom, and the clerk said that he had left word he had gone to meet you."

"Possibly he went to the embassy. May I use your telephone?" Hardly waiting for Penelope's answer, Montagu was at the branch instrument; his telephone conversation, however, proved unsatisfactory, judging by his heavy frown.

"Tom hasn't been there," he explained, hanging up the receiver. "Nor has he sent any note or message. I wish now that I had thought to call him up

from the Metropolitan Club before lunching with Beloselsky."

Penelope drew her handkerchief back and forth through her fingers, a nervous trick she had.

"I did not know that you see so much of Beloselsky," she said. "He doesn't seem your type, somehow."

Norma laughed aloud as she glanced at Montagu's fine physique and clear-cut features. "Poor little Beloselsky." Again she laughed. "He is an amusing little cuss, if you have time for gossip; then there is some satisfaction in having a man around who always agrees with what you say."

"True," responded Montagu, returning her mischievous smile. "Beloselsky has an open mind."

"Quite so, open at both ends," commented Penelope dryly. "Was Nelson Thorpe of your party, also?"

"No," and at the brevity of his tone, Norma's eyebrows arched prettily.

"I am glad you share my antipathy in that quarter," she exclaimed with the downright candor which was her distinguishing characteristic. "I can't see why you have him hanging around, Pen. Frankly, I wish he had stayed in the Orient." Turning impulsively to Montagu, she added: "Mr. Thorpe's mother was a high-caste Chinese, you know."

"Ah!" The exclamation escaped Montagu invol-

untarily; he recovered himself with a quickness which proved his fitness for diplomacy. "That accounts for Thorpe's taste for the oriental," he said. "I am told his house at Silver Springs is filled with extremely valuable silks and jade from China and Japan, really museum pieces, in fact."

"Well, if that's the case, I hope Mr. Thorpe asks us out to see them," Norma declared, with utter disregard of the inconsistency of her remarks. "I don't like the man, but I adore jade. I gathered the impression from you, Pen, that he was interested only in ancient armor; why, he sent you some silly daggers—what did you call them?"

Penelope shrugged her shoulders. "Daggers is as good a word as any," she answered. "They are sort of this shape," demonstrating with a graceful movement of her hand.

"I see—Malay creese effect," responded Montagu, and caught instantly the sudden light that flamed her eyes and then died down.

"I used them for letter openers," she went on in a dead monotone. "But I haven't seen either of the daggers since I moved here. Remind me to ask Susie to-morrow to hunt them up, Norma." She played for a second with the string of pearls at her throat. "Do you think it possible, Gilbert, that Commander Laughton may have come in and, without stopping at the desk downstairs, gone to your apartment?"

"By Jove, it might be!" Montagu took a hasty step in the direction of the hall. "I'll run over there and see."

"Be sure and come back," called Norma. "And put the front door latch down so you can get in. It's perfectly safe, Pen," turning to her cousin. "It won't take Gilbert but a moment; they are on the same floor with us. Pen," with a complete change of tone, "I've been thinking while you and Gilbert were talking. There's something which has just struck me—wait, and I'll show you both!" and springing to her feet she hurried away.

Penelope sat quietly on the sofa for some minutes, then rising, went over to her Boule desk. Pulling open one of the drawers, she tossed its contents about, but what she sought was not there. With puckered brow she surveyed the ornaments on the top of the desk; from there her gaze traveled about the room, taking especial note of the bric-a-brac in cabinets and the oriental objects of art on the mantel and small tables. She had circled the room when the telephone bell sounded once; if she had not been close to the instrument its faint note might not have been heard. Snatching the instrument from its stand, she pressed the receiver to her ear.

"Yes," she called. "Yes; this is she. I cannot hear you—who is speaking? Your voice is very indistinct. Ah!" She leaned slightly against the

wall of the room as the sense of the message came to her. "I understand," she stammered, after a breathless minute. "Yes—yes. . . . I can't hear . . . repeat it. . . . The Upper Ten Club . . . to-night . . . now."

Penelope stood for an instant staring into space, then she replaced the receiver and putting down the telephone, slipped from the drawing-room through the door opening into the dining room, and by so doing missed seeing Gilbert Montagu standing just inside the hall door. Having followed Norma's advice as to leaving the latch down, he had walked in unannounced in time to hear Penelope's closing words at the telephone. Surprised at Penelope's abrupt departure and at Norma's absence, he remained where he was. At the sound of a soft footstep, he looked down the hall and saw Penelope, with hat on, struggling into a light summer coat. Without a glance in his direction and with a swiftness which left him gasping, she passed down the hall and out of the front door. Montagu paused in indecision for a second only, then left the apartment as silently as he had entered it; one idea uppermost. Penelope had asked him to find out if her husband was in his apartment; he must get word to her before she left the building. He missed the elevator she caught by the fraction of a second and sped down the staircase in pursuit. A party of young people blocked

the entrance of the Van Vleet and he could not charge through them. By the time he reached the pavement Penelope had started her car. His hail was lost in the noise of the shifting gears as the car pulled away from the curb and darted up the street.

Montagu ran halfway up the block, then stopped as he saw the roadster gather momentum and swing into a cross street. A hot hand clutched his and looking over his shoulder Montagu recognized Tom Laughton.

"Don't stop," the latter panted. "I have a car around the corner." They were running even as he spoke; a second more and Laughton flung himself into a touring car, standing with engine throbbing. "Did you notice the roadster and the car following it?" he demanded, as his chauffeur turned for orders.

"Yes, sir; they are continuing down this street," pointing to where a tail light could be dimly seen in the distance.

"Go ahead; keep them always in sight," ordered Laughton, and as the man obeyed him, he turned to his mystified companion. "I was coming up the street and recognized my wife as she stood for a second under the lights of the Van Vleet. As she hurried toward her car, I saw a man spring out on the further side and dart to a car apparently waiting for him across the street. Did you notice the second car, Gilbert?"

"Not particularly. I was simply conscious of a car passing me as I ran after Mrs. Laughton," replied Montagu. "I had no idea that she was being shadowed."

Laughton's strong hands closed and unclosed. "The man ran like a sailor," he muttered. "By God! If it's who I think it is, I'll kill him!"

As Penelope Laughton left the city behind her, she pulled her coat more closely over her throat: the night air was chill, and she was not too warmly clad. She had driven much the previous spring and was familiar with many of the roads in the vicinity of Washington, and having a well-developed bump of locality she had not lost herself as she drove the car through bisecting avenues and twisted and turned up and down intersecting streets. She had driven with scarcely diminishing speed in spite of the poor street illumination; a condition which confronts every motorist in the nation's capital. In the more open country just beyond the city limits, her foot pressed the accelerator and, with a silent prayer that she would not meet a traffic officer, she continued toward her destination. She was nearly there when she caught sight in her small vision mirror of the headlights of a car some distance behind her. She had observed them before, and the regularity of the distance always kept between the headlights and her car struck her anew. She slowed up appreciably

and waited for the car to pass her, but it remained in the background and, as her speed varied, it varied also.

Penelope's heart missed a beat and then raced on. The road was lonely and it was long after ten o'clock. Could it be a police car pacing her? Or was it—

As they topped a small hill Penelope saw a curve ahead; it was a section of the road she knew well. Her foot came down on the accelerator, and the car shot around the curve. As she vanished from the sight of the pursuing car, she shut off her lights and, checking speed slightly, swung to her right and into a narrow lane which had the general appearance of being simply the entrance to a farm, the buildings of which were far to the left of where she was. Her engine was running noiselessly, and with the lights still out Penelope drove onward, trusting to her splendid eyesight and the instinctive feel of the wheel to keep to the narrow lane, on either side of which grew a high and protecting hedge. She had covered three-quarters of a mile when she made out a turn to the left. It was the short cut she had been looking for. Ten minutes later she turned again and continued up a little-used driveway. The house she sought loomed up faintly against the skyline, and she drew up to one side of the road and shut off the ignition. Convinced that her car was far enough to one side to escape being hit by a passing vehicle, she

started to cross the private roadway and approach the house, which was surrounded with heavy shrubbery and a grove of wonderful old trees. Penelope stumbled slightly as she went down the inclined path, which she made out but dimly.

"Have a care, madam," said a soft voice to her right, and Penelope started visibly. "The descent is steep."

"And, therefore, pleasantly dangerous," Penelope regained her courage at the sound of a friendly voice. "Where are the veranda steps?"

"Straight ahead," the voice came from behind the shrubbery, but evidently the unseen speaker kept abreast of her, for Penelope occasionally distinguished the rustle of autumn leaves as he moved cautiously along.

It was with a sense of relief that Penelope reached the veranda and ran lightly up the steps; a door opening upon it swung inward on well-oiled hinges at her approach, and she passed inside the house. One electric light bulb, high up in the ceiling, was the only illumination in the long, narrow passageway, and Penelope peered anxiously at the person who had admitted her. He was a young man, not more than five and twenty, pale; but with traces of what must have been beauty before the ravages of disease came to mar both face and form. He noticed her hesitancy and advanced to her side.

"Straight ahead," he murmured, "and across the central hall, then to the right. You are expected."

Penelope followed his directions explicitly. The central hall, of large dimension and paneled in oak, was occupied by several men, who sat or lounged in various postures against the carved furniture. They rose as Penelope advanced, but none approached or addressed her. The square hall, like the smaller passageway, was poorly lighted, but in Penelope's quick estimate of her surroundings, she judged the men, swarthy and small of stature, were of foreign extraction. Acknowledging their presence with a slight bow, Penelope crossed the hall and walked through the only door that stood open.

As she crossed the threshold and stopped before a center table, the electric wall brackets which served to light the room went slowly out, one by one, and she was left in utter darkness. Startled beyond speech, Penelope passed her tongue over her dry lips as she tried to still her rapidly beating heart.

"What mummery is this?" she asked as soon as she had mastered her alarm.

As mysteriously as they had been extinguished, the lights came slowly on again and Penelope saw three hooded figures seated around the table.

"Your chair is there," the man directly opposite Penelope broke the silence. "Be seated."

Slowly Penelope did as she was told. "You are

pleased to be dramatic," she commented. "Why the hood and gown? I am not," with a brave smile, "an impressionable young miss of sixteen."

"Your levity is ill-timed," stated the first speaker. "Your signature is desired on this paper," and leaning forward he placed before her a piece of parchment, while one of his companions laid a fountain pen in Penelope's hand, which rested, half open, on the table.

Penelope glanced at the long list of signatures which filled the third and fourth pages and then turned the parchment over. She read the opening paragraph in its neat, precise penmanship slowly, and so on down the first page and over the next. As she read the closing sentences of the document her face blanched.

"But this is treason," she cried. "Treason."

"You should choose your words with more care," admonished the man by her side. "They conflict with your statement that you considered the noblest privilege of an American citizen to be absolute freedom of thought and action."

"But there is a higher principle which far outweighs that privilege," declared Penelope, as her color rose. "Loyalty to my country. Nothing will induce me to sign this document from soviet Russia."

"Nothing?" questioned the smooth voice across

the table. "Not even the prospect of arrest for the murder of Clifford Burton?"

Penelope sat as if carved out of marble, her face devoid of color.

"So!" She drew in her breath with a sudden sucking sound. "You threaten me?"

"Yes," calmly; "to do good in the end."

"A truly Jesuitical principle." Penelope's stiff fingers fumbled with her silver vanity box; she must gain time—her brain was on fire. The top section of the box contained rouge; mechanically she opened the lid and taking out the small pad applied it to her cheeks with the aid of the mirror in the lid of the box. It was an expensive trinket and the mirror of excellent clarity and magnifying quality. As Penelope scanned herself she caught a glimpse of the room behind her. A number of the men, whom she had seen in the central hall, had entered and stood near the doorway, one at the moment ventured closer and came directly in her line of vision. He was gone in an instant, but in that instant Penelope recognized Señor Lopez. She closed her vanity box and slipped it inside her coat pocket.

"Threats are idle, gentlemen," she said. "You claim apparently that I killed Clifford Burton. What proof have you?"

"That furnished by your son," calmly.

"Bobby!" Penelope sprang to her feet, her face

livid. "You lie! He did not see me—" She stopped, appalled, as realization came over her.

"You have betrayed yourself—" low, menacing, the voice across the table continued speaking, but it was a second or two before Penelope understood what was being said. "There is the paper; we require your signature," the man stated. "Sign."

Like some hunted creature at bay, Penelope gazed about her. Was it years or only weeks since she had stood in that very room, a prospective tenant, and been shown its one redeeming feature in its inharmonious architectural plans by an anxious real estate agent, solicitous to rent the house to her? An addition added to the original mansion, it was used as a sun parlor or breakfast room, and the further wall was broken by long French windows which opened upon a paved terrace. Floor-length curtains were stretched across the French windows, all except one—

Penelope pushed back her chair and rose slowly. "I refuse to sign that document," she stated. "I refuse, absolutely."

"Do you fully understand the step you are taking?" demanded the hooded figure by her side. "The police—"

"They are outside—see!" and Penelope, with the courage born of desperation, pointed to the French window where crouched a kneeling figure. Instinc-

tively her companions whirled around and with one accord raced for the window as the figure outside disappeared from view.

As Penelope drew back, she saw Lopez leap for the document on the table. He had it almost within his grasp, but she was too quick for him. With terror lending wings to her feet, she sped through the concealed opening into the garden and gained her car. Three seconds later, two men, blinded by her headlights, had just time to swerve aside as the powerful car rushed down the drive and swept into the public highway leading to Washington.

CHAPTER XVIII

A PAWN IN THE GAME

NORMA stared blankly about the empty drawing-room; she had left Penelope there not ten minutes before. Where in the world had her cousin gone?

"Pen?" she called. "Where are you?" She waited a minute, then getting no response, hurried to her cousin's bedroom and from there to her boudoir. Norma's mystification grew as she completed a tour of the apartment; Penelope certainly was not there. Why had she gone out, and why did she go at that hour of the night? And above all, why, why had she left without a word to her?

Norma returned to her cousin's bedroom and looked around. She recalled having seen Penelope's motoring coat and hat flung on the bed—the indentation on the white spread where they had lain was plain to be seen, but both coat and hat were missing. Norma went back to the drawing-room with mixed feelings. Penelope must have taken the occasion of her absence to *steal* out of the apartment—no other word expressed it, for while she, Norma, had been absorbed in her search for her address book, she

would most decidedly have heard her cousin go to her bedroom and return down the hall unless she had taken pains *not* to be overheard. Norma curled up on the sofa and pondered deeply; then shaking her head, gave up that problem for another. Why was Gilbert Montagu so long in returning to the apartment as he had said he would? Had he rung the front doorbell and she not heard it?

Norma sprang up and hurried down the hall. Opening the front door she tested the night latch. It was down and Montagu had only to turn the knob of the door and walk into the apartment. Again Norma went back to the drawing-room considerably perturbed in mind. It was getting late, and she felt that she must see Montagu—time was precious. Hurrying to the telephone, she called up the desk and asked for the Englishman's apartment. Then followed a long wait, during which she heard the house operator ring Montagu's number with loud insistency.

"Nobody answers," reported the operator, at the end of five minutes, and Norma put down the instrument with a sense of bewilderment. Had Montagu returned to the apartment and gone out with Penelope? If so, why so much secrecy about it? Why not take her into their confidence?

For a moment blind, bitter jealousy tore at her heart strings, and her hands clenched and unclenched

in speechless agony. Gradually reason reasserted itself and calmed her chaotic thoughts. She had the grace to feel ashamed. What if her cousin and her fiancé had gone out together and left her alone, there was nothing to get upset about—they undoubtedly had sufficiently good reasons for their conduct, and she was a fool to worry further.

Norma walked around and around the drawing-room, a trick she had when disturbed in mind. She had left Penelope because of a sudden idea and had gone to her bedroom to find her address book. Her search for it had been of longer duration than she had anticipated, for with the perversity of inanimate objects, the book had got misplaced, and she finally found it at the very bottom of her trunk.

Norma paused by the sofa, on which she had tossed her address book, and, sitting down, turned its pages rapidly, until she found the entry she wished. "Aunt Polly," she read. "Rear 3040 Dumbarton Avenue," and closed the book.

Just before Montagu left the drawing-room to find out if Tom Laughton had returned to his apartment, an idea had occurred to Norma, and as she considered it, while Penelope and Montagu chatted on, it grew upon her. Not certain that she had her old address book with her, she had waited until she found it before taking Penelope into her confidence. During her hasty search for Bobby in Mrs. Ruther-

ford Laughton's apartment that afternoon, she remembered seeing a book lying open on his bed, and the flyleaf bore the name, "Aunt Polly," in Bobby's round, childish writing. The book had made but scant impression at the time, but it had flashed into her mind with startling vividness, apropos of nothing, and her thoughts had turned to her old family servant, whom old Mrs. Rutherford Laughton had employed for a brief period, before Señor Lopez' advent, to look after her grandson. Bobby's devotion to Aunt Polly had been a bond between Norma and her small cousin, for she loved her old black mammy dearly.

Could it be that Bobby had taken out the book to read and at sight of Aunt Polly's name had decided to go and see her and had prolonged his visit to his old nurse for twenty-four hours? Aunt Polly could neither read nor write and would, therefore, be unaware of the hue and cry raised in the newspapers for Bobby. It was the one place where Bobby might be—the one place of which no one had thought.

Early in May Bobby had told Norma that Aunt Polly had moved into the city, after several months with a relative in Virginia, and repeated the old woman's address, which Norma had jotted down in her book, intending to run in and see her; but the summer had gone, and in her multitudinous duties she had failed to look up Aunt Polly; in fact, even

the address had escaped her mind. If she had not located the book, she would have had no means of finding Aunt Polly—the latter had moved into Washington too recently to be in the city directory and the poor soul was most certainly not a telephone subscriber.

Norma jotted the address down on a piece of paper and then glanced at the clock; half past ten. Should she wait for Penelope and Montagu? No; she had become obsessed with but one idea and inaction was torture to her—in locating Bobby she would solve the mystery of Clifford Burton's cold-blooded murder!

Norma left the Van Vleet ten minutes later and hurried toward Connecticut Avenue. She had fully expected to take a taxi, knowing that the manager of the apartment house chartered a number of cars for his patrons, but the doorman told her none was on call at the moment and advised her to wait. Norma, keyed up to unusual excitement at the prospect of finding Bobby, was in too nervous a state to follow his advice, and set off across the city, her objective being Dupont Circle; there she knew she was almost certain to find a taxi, for close to it was a public cab stand. She was a swift walker, and her mind centered on her errand, she took little note of the silent streets which she traversed. Hurrying around Dupont Circle, she stopped at the public cab

stand and gave vent to a sharp exclamation—not a taxi was in sight.

Norma turned and looked eagerly toward the Georgetown street car line; her newspaper experience had taught her that at that hour of the night longer intervals prevailed in the up-town car service. Evidently she was doomed to a wait, whether of short or long duration depended upon a kind or adverse fate, for there was no sign of any moving thing, human or mechanical. Norma debated for a moment; it would prove a long and dreary walk across Rock Creek bridge into Georgetown, and the streets of that section of the northwest were narrow and dark. The wiser course was to wait for an electric car, but even as Norma reached that decision, a closed automobile swung into Massachusetts Avenue and drew up to the curb in front of the cab stand sign. As it came to a halt, Norma was at the door and had clutched the handle.

"Take me to Dumbarton Avenue and Thirtieth Street," she directed, and was inside the car before the chauffeur had time to move. He started the car with a jerk which brought Norma's shoulders against the upholstered back of the seat with a force which momentarily deprived her of breath, and turning around drove rapidly in the direction of the Q Street bridge.

After its somewhat jerky start, the car ran swiftly

and well and Norma reached the intersecting streets she was bound for in record time.

"'Ere ye are, lidy," the chauffeur had left his wheel and stood by the open door. "The charge is—"

"Oh, I still want you," broke in Norma. "Drive down Thirtieth Street until you come to an alley which runs behind these houses fronting on Dumbarton Avenue and turn into it. I'll signal to you when to stop."

To make certain that the man understood her directions, Norma leaned partly out of the car and the light from the street lamp, to which the chauffeur had his back turned, fell full on her face. His slight start escaped her notice as his hand sought the visor of his cap and pulled it down on his forehead, still further sheltering his features from her view.

"Very good, miss," he responded civilly, and obeyed her instructions to the letter.

It took a few minutes to locate the entrance to the alley. Norma hardly noticed the slight delay. She had caught the man's cockney accent, and her active brain was trying to place where she had heard it before.

It was a broad alley, which wound around between old stables, converted by thrifty owners into garages, and a number of two-story tenement houses. The latter, somewhat ramshackle in appearance, were like many another in the alleys of Washington where

dwelt its poorer class, both white and black. They had proceeded about what Norma judged to be half the length of the alley when she spied a tin sign, with black lettering on a write background, hanging askew on the wall of a brick dwelling standing across from the only lamp-post the alley boasted. Norma tapped on the glass partition between herself and the chauffeur, and the car came to a standstill. She was out of the car before the slower-moving chauffeur and going closer to the building read the tin sign with its half-obliterated numerals: 3040.

Norma heaved a sigh of delight; the first half of her task was completed far more quickly than she had anticipated; there only remained to locate the front door of the house. She stared in some perplexity at the blank wall and walked to one side; the building, small and square in shape, was detached from its mates, but a high board fence precluded any suggestion of entrance on that side. In some perplexity Norma circled the place, with the conviction growing upon her that possibly she would have to rouse the occupants of 3040 Dumbarton Avenue to reach Aunt Polly, for evidently the latter's house was built on the back of their lot and the fence connected the two dwellings.

"'Ere miss, this wye," volunteered the chauffeur, who had done some exploring on his own initiative; and as Norma sped around the house and joined

him, "See, there's a bloomin' door let into the yard," and he pointed to it.

"Let in" described it, for the door was but two of the boards swung on creaking hinges and her head came on a level with the supporting rail. "'Ave a care, miss," in his effort to be of assistance, the chauffeur endeavored to hold back the door and a rusty nail caught in his cap, and dragged it off.

Norma gasped in astonishment as her gaze rested on the face so close to her own, for he had stooped forward in his effort to catch his cap before it fell to the ground.

"Simpson!" she exclaimed. "Why, surely, it is Simpson, Mr. Burton's servant?"

"Yes, miss." Simpson grinned sheepishly. "In hodd hours hoff, miss, I drives a taxi; it's a prime wye o' makin' money, for people are generous at night and tips are frequent. You mustn't think 'ardly of me, miss; Hi'm a poor man," and the whine in his voice grated on her ear.

"It is none of my business, Simpson," she replied. "One might question your lack of feeling for Mr. Burton in seeking such employment when he lies dead and unburied; but," with a fleeting smile, "I might have been out of a ride had you proven more loyal to his memory."

"Yes, miss," with a humility belied by the angry gleam in his pig-eyes. "But the p'lice 'ave taken over

'is 'ouse, and Hi'm turned loose, so to speak. Can Hi 'elp ye, miss?" as Norma ducked through the opening in the fence. "Hi 'ave a flashlight in the car."

"Get it, will you please," Norma stumbled over a loose board lying on the ground and regained her balance with some difficulty. Simpson, even if a "weak sister," was better than no one in a pinch, and she waited impatiently for his return before venturing further inside the yard.

Had she chanced to glance upward, she might have seen a head appear cautiously at one of the windows of the second story; it ducked out of sight at Simpson's approach, heralded by a broad beam of light. Under its guidance Norma picked her way to the few rickety steps which led to the front door. Her first rap brought no response and Simpson, who had kept at her side, brought his fist against the panels with a resounding bang, followed by several others in rapid succession.

"Wait," cautioned Norma, as he prepared to repeat the blows. "Some one is moving inside."

The door opened slowly, and an alarmed voice came through the crack.

"Who am you?" it demanded. "Disturbin' respectable cullud folks at dis hyar time ob de night?"

"Aunt Polly," called Norma softly. "It is I, Miss Norma; let me in, dear."

Aunt Polly opened the door a bit wider and peered outside.

"It sholy am yo'!" she exclaimed in joyful surprise. "Come right in, Miss Norma, an' welcome. Who am dat wuf yo'?" catching sight of Simpson.

"Just my chauffeur," Norma turned on the threshold. "Wait for me in the car, Simpson," and the door closed in the servant's face. Far from following Norma's explicit orders, Simpson quietly squatted down and applied first his eye and then his ear to the keyhole of the door. As detached fragments of conversation reached him, his features were distorted by a malignant leer. He was so intent on what was going on inside that a small shadow slipped unnoticed around the house and across the yard and was lost among the deeper shadows beyond the fence.

In the apartment which served Aunt Polly as dining room and kitchen, Norma sat back in her chair and regarded her old mammy with radiant countenance.

"So I was right!" she exclaimed. "Bobby came to you yesterday—"

"He sho' did," declared Aunt Polly. "He 'lowed his grandma wouldn't be hyar fo' quite some days, an', as he said 'twas lonesome in that there department o' her'n, I let him stay wif me. We ain't been off'n de place, 'cause I'm puttin' de big house, whar

Marse an' ole Miss Fitzhugh live, to rights 'gainst der comin' home nex' Sunday, an' I had plenty o' corn pone, bacon, an' a chicken. Bobby, he eats like I dunno what!" Aunt Polly's comely face expanded into a cheery smile, good to see. Suddenly she grew grave. "Bobby ain't too well, Miss Norma; he talks an' tumbles in his sleep. 'Tain't natural fo' a boy like Bobby to act that-away. An' he won't go into de street, 'cause he's afeard that there teacher o' his will kotch him."

"Señor Lopez?" questioningly, and as Aunt Polly nodded her head vigorously, Norma added, "I don't imagine Bobby will be left to Lopez' care now that his father is here."

"Bless de Lawd!" Aunt Polly's voice held genuine rejoicing. "S'pose we tell Bobby—"

"Yes, and I must take him back to his mother."

Aunt Polly turned from the staircase. "To his mother," she repeated. "Dat am good news. Wait, Miss Norma, an' I'll get him; he's upstairs a-sleepin' in my brudder's room; Jim," she added by way of explanation, "he's stayin' a spell in Richmond." She vanished inside a doorway even as she spoke, and her voice trailed after her.

Norma, who had followed Aunt Polly into the tiny hallway, with its ladderlike stairs, heard the latter's heavy tread across the floor, stop, and then move onward, more rapidly.

"Miss Norma! Please come hyar!" Aunt Polly's call held an urgent note, and Norma ran upstairs and into the room opening almost directly from it. By the aid of the one gas jet, which Aunt Polly had turned up to its fullest capacity, she saw her old servant standing by an empty bed. "Bobby's done gone, miss!"

Norma gazed at the colored woman in amazement. "It's not possible!" she exclaimed. "Why should he run away from me?"

Aunt Polly's eyes were twice their natural size, and her face was gray. "I been through my room an' de bathroom an' de closets, an' dem's the onliest rooms on dis flo'. Bobby's gone. I 'spek he musta thought that thar man with yo' was his teacher."

"Perhaps," replied Norma dully. A sick wave of disappointment surged over her. Why had she sat talking to Aunt Polly, instead of sending for the boy at once? "Listen," she added. "Should Bobby return, bring him at once to the Van Vleet. Here is money—" emptying her purse on the table. "Come with him yourself, Aunt Polly; don't let any one take the boy from you. I must hurry back to his mother," and paying no attention to the colored woman's excited comments and promises, Norma dashed down the staircase. She fumbled for the latch of the door and brief as her delay was it gave Simpson a chance to retreat into the yard.

"Have you seen a small boy?" she asked breathlessly, catching sight of the servant standing by the fence.

"No, miss." Simpson swung his electric torch slowly around. "He never came out of the 'ouse since you 'ave been hinside. Shall Hi 'unt about, miss?"

Norma paused for reflection. "No," she replied. "Aunt Polly will bring Master Bobby to us if he is anywhere in this vicinity. Take me to the Van Vleet, Simpson, but as you go, keep a sharp outlook for a small boy."

"Very good, miss," and Simpson piloted her to the taxi and took his place behind the wheel. As the taxi slowed down to almost a standstill to make an abrupt turn in the alley, a second passenger found a precarious perch on a spare tire rack, and secure from view, enjoyed the run across the Q Street bridge into Washington.

Norma watched the streets for a small figure with eager, intent eyes as they hurried along and she bitterly upbraided herself for permitting Bobby to slip through her fingers. She had planned such a triumphant return.

Norma, half-blinded by a particle of dust which blew in through the open window, spent a few painful minutes getting it out of her eye. As she lowered her handkerchief the car stopped by the curb,

and Simpson, switching off his engine, sprang out and opened the door for her.

"Just a moment, Miss Page," he said, and Norma, somewhat surprised that he did not move away from the door and permit her to leave the car, remained seated. "I overheard Mr. Burton say his nephew, Sir Gilbert, was in love with you."

"Simpson!" Norma was conscious of blushing hotly. The servant gave her no opportunity to say more.

"There's something you orter know, miss," he went on, leering at her most unpleasantly. "Sir Gilbert knew his uncle was to meet young Mrs. Laughton in her mother-in-law's apartment Monday night," he paused and lowered his voice. "Sir Gilbert went there after them."

Norma stared at him, uncomprehendingly at first, and then as she took in the sense of his words, her face whitened.

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"I followed him there." Simpson licked his lips; he relished the situation. "How much is that piece of information worth to ye', miss?"

Norma's eyes flashed in indignation. "Not a cent more than—"

"To them?" questioned Simpson, swiftly, and pointed with his finger to the stately mansion where the Lion and the Unicorn look down on Connecticut

Avenue, and for the first time Norma realized they had not reached the Van Vleet. "The British Ambassador is back, miss; do ye think 'e would be hinterested in knowing 'ow Sir Gilbert 'elped young Mrs. Laughton down the fire escape?"

Overwhelmed with the rapid, vehement torrent of words, Norma shrank back. For a moment things were black before her, then her head cleared and she caught again what Simpson was saying:

"Hi am a poor man, Miss Page," his voice again held its customary whine. "The p'lice 'ave offered a reward for information—"

Norma pushed the hair off her forehead.

"What's your price?" she cut in swiftly.

"Twelve thousand dollars cash," he leaned further inside the cab. "Sir Gilbert 'as hit, if ye 'aven't; and hit's buyin' 'is safety."

Simpson doubted if Norma heard him, she kept so silent, so motionless. When she finally spoke, he almost failed to recognize her voice.

"Drive to the Van Vleet," she said. "My check book is there."

CHAPTER XIX

THE SPIDER'S WEB

MOTORCYCLE POLICEMAN McQUADE stopped tinkering with his disabled machine and turning about glanced up New Hampshire Avenue as the sound of a speeding automobile reached his ears. Traveling at the rate of forty miles an hour, it covered the distance to where he stood, whistle at lips, a few seconds after he first descried its headlights. As the car swept by him, he saw that the driver was a woman.

With an agility which had gained him place and fame on the metropolitan police force, McQuade leaped for the running board and missed it by a bare few inches. He was still on his hands and knees on the asphalt when a second car rushed past, swerving to one side to avoid his recumbent figure, distinguishable in the glare of the headlights.

As McQuade gained his feet he saw the first car, its speed evidently somewhat diminished, make a right-hand turn into the next cross-street just at the moment that a third car, coming due west, swept down upon it. The danger was seen by the car behind; like a thing alive, it leaped ahead and dashed

between Penelope Laughton and the third car—there was a grinding of brakes, a swerve to the left, a sickening crash which brought the suddenly awakened occupants of houses within the radius of the sound, to their windows.

Penelope stopped her roadster in front of the side entrance to the Van Vleet and looked back; with Aladdinlike magic the crowd was already collecting in what had been a quiet and deserted street. She was conscious of deadly faintness and sat still, for the moment unable to move; she had thought death inevitable a second before. Slowly she gathered her spent faculties, and the twinkling lights of Sixteenth Street, which crossed the westbound street a hundred rods or so beyond where she was parked, assumed natural proportions.

The blood was coursing more naturally through Penelope's veins when she finally locked her car and stepped out on the pavement, but her progress toward the side door of the Van Vleet was barred by McQuade and a number of strangers who, their curiosity still unsatisfied, were following the uniformed traffic officer as a matter of course.

"You were exceeding the speed limit, madam," he began, but Penelope brusquely interrupted him.

"I will pay my fine," she exclaimed, incoherently. "But let me go to my apartment first."

"In a moment." McQuade's manner, though cour-

teous, was firm. "Let me see your driver's permit. I insist, madam," as she started to brush by him.

With stiff, numb fingers Penelope opened her handbag and fumbled for the leather folder in which she kept both her Maryland and District of Columbia permits. As she produced it, her handkerchief fell unheeded to the sidewalk.

"You had a close call, madam," observed McQuade, jotting down the number of her District permit in his memorandum book. "If the car following you hadn't dashed ahead and caused the other to swerve, you'd have been a goner; as it was," returning the leather folder, "it was a bad smash—and it looks as if the driver was done for. Why was he following you?" with a penetrating glance into her white, strained countenance.

Penelope dropped the folder inside her bag before answering.

"The car tried several times to overtake me," she admitted. "I concluded, from the peculiar manner in which it was driven, that the person at the wheel was intoxicated. That was why," with a quick, conciliatory smile, "I was breaking the speed limit to avoid him."

"He drove as if the devil was chasing 'em," said McQuade. "If he was 'tanked,' he's paid for it, poor devil. Where are you going, madam?" as Penelope turned away.

"Into the Van Vleet, to my apartment." Penelope felt a tug at her elbow as the small crowd about her was augmented by new arrivals. She would have looked around, but her attention was arrested by a remark made by one of the bystanders to another.

"They say the navy officer lives here."

Penelope whirled back and faced McQuade, who had stepped to the curb and was jotting down the numbers of the license tag on her roadster.

"Who drove the car behind mine?" she demanded breathlessly.

McQuade added the last numeral before looking up. "I don't know his name," he said. "A plain-clothes officer, Doyle by name, and the regular patrolman on this beat were there, and so I came after you." He shut his book with a snap and pocketed it. "From what I could see, the driver wore a navy uniform."

Penelope's heart missed a beat and then raced on. To keep her balance she clutched the arm of the person next to her, then as the touch of vertigo left her, she started up the street, the person to whom she still unceremoniously clung keeping in step with her and the crowd gave way as they elbowed their way through. The car Penelope sought had come in violent contact with a lamp-post and lay on its side half on the sidewalk, its engine a crumpled wreck. Penelope's gaze sought the twisted steering

wheel. Whoever had sat behind it was there no longer. Impulsively she bent down and grasped the wheel. It was moist and sticky to the touch, and when she removed her hand her fingers were stained a bright crimson.

"Commander Laughton drove the car," the words reached Penelope from a far distance; there was a roaring of a thousand Niagaras in her ears and she saw the face so near to her own through a blurred mist; as the nose, mouth and eyes took form she drew back, aghast—Señor Lopez was at her elbow, then, even as a sharp cry broke from her, he was swallowed up in the surging throng as an Emergency Hospital ambulance, summoned by some excited individual, drove up, its horn sounding a deep-throated warning.

A familiar voice accosted Penelope as the latter strove to reach the blue-coated patrolman who had gone to converse with the young doctor and the ambulance driver.

"Mrs. Laughton, you here!" Boris Beloselsky sprang to her side, genuine distress depicted in his agitated features. "But this is tragic! You must leave at once!"

Penelope resisted his effort to lead her away. "Where is my husband?" she asked, through quivering lips.

"Sir Gilbert Montagu has taken him to his

mother's apartment." Beloselsky held her hand sympathetically in his. "The Commander, while but semi-conscious, asked to go to his mother." The hand in his gave a spasmodic twist and then lay still. Quite unaware of the direction she was heading, Penelope took several steps down the street and stopped by the side of a third automobile. The damage to it was slight, a broken wheel where it had struck the curb and a smashed windshield were the outward indications of the force with which it had stopped in its dash down the street.

Nelson Thorpe turned away from the car in a rage just as Penelope and the Russian reached the scene.

"Curse the meddling fool!" he raved. "This wouldn't have happened if Laughton hadn't driven right athwart our bows and forced us out of our course. By—! I'll make him pay!"

"Gently, my friend, gently!" Beloselsky held up a cautioning hand. "Do you not see Mrs. Laughton?"

The passion died out of Thorpe's face, and his expression grew inscrutable.

"You should not be here," he exclaimed solicitously. "Let me see you home," and as Penelope stumbled over a break in the asphalt pavement, "Beloselsky, take her arm."

Penelope submitted to their leadership for only

a few rods, however; then with an abruptness which took them completely by surprise, she swung around.

"I am going to my mother-in-law's apartment," she stated briefly, and not waiting to see what became of them she hurried toward New Hampshire Avenue. At the entrance of the apartment house Thorpe and Beloselsky overtook her.

"Consider a moment," the former begged, as Penelope paused at their hail. "Is it wise to go to that apartment again?"

The string of pearls Penelope wore with her summer evening dress had become caught in a button of her overcoat and as she straightened up they dragged across her throat until the string was taut. It took her a second to unwind them and release the pressure from her throat. When she looked again at her companions, her manner was entirely composed and her gaze unshaken.

"On second thought," she began, "I have decided not to go—alone"; the emphasis on the last word was unmistakable. "Therefore, I invite you both to accompany me. Come," and calmly taking their consent for granted, she led the way inside the apartment house.

Inspector Mitchell, standing just within the open door of Mrs. Rutherford Laughton's apartment, watched Penelope and her two companions leave the elevator with unfeigned astonishment. He partly

closed the door an instant to exchange a whispered word with Pat McGuire then, as the janitor nodded his head in understanding and slipped away, he admitted Penelope. Without an instant's hesitation, she walked down the corridor and into the library.

The bandages which Mrs. Rutherford Laughton was taking from the Red Cross emergency kit and handing to Celeste, dropped from the French maid's fingers and rolled unheeded to the further end of the library.

"Madame—madame!" Celeste could hardly articulate. "See whom you have here?" and she pointed an agitated finger at Penelope and the three men, for Inspector Mitchell had walked gravely after them as they passed down the hall.

Mrs. Laughton closed the lid of the box standing on the floor at her feet and straightened up in her chair. Her face, flushed from the exertion of stooping, turned apoplectic in hue at sight of her daughter-in-law.

"You show strange familiarity with my apartment," she snarled. "Your effrontery passes belief. How dare you intrude upon me at this time?"

As Penelope met her furious gaze her hands clenched themselves inside the pockets of her coat, but she gave no outward sign of emotion.

"I have not come to see you," she stated quietly. "I desire to be with my husband."

"A desire which he does not reciprocate," declared Mrs. Laughton insolently. "Kindly leave at once, and—eh—take those persons with you," a sweep of her hand indicated Beloselsky and Thorpe, who bowed in unison as they encountered her enraged glance. "Celeste, show them out."

Celeste actually jumped at the sharp command, but before she reached the library door Sir Gilbert Montagu stepped inside the portières. At sight of those already in the library he halted involuntarily. Penelope gave him no time for speech, much less thought.

"Is Tom seriously hurt?" she demanded, and there was an unmistakable catch in her throat as she put the question.

"The doctor says not," responded Montagu and caught the look that flamed her eyes to unwonted brilliance; it died at his next words. "A broken arm and a cut on his temple—"

"Ah, then he will be up and about very soon?" broke in Beloselsky, finding it impossible to keep silent any longer.

"Possibly." Montagu fixed his monocle carefully in his eye and scanned his companions with keen interest. "Unfortunately, Laughton appears to have lost the desire common to all mankind, the desire to live."

"It would appear so, judging from the way he

tried to drive his car into mine," retorted Nelson Thorpe, sarcastically; he had caught and read aright Penelope's shocked expression and his anger kindled anew. "It's your job in life explaining matters, Sir Gilbert; therefore, tell us why you and Tom Laughton were chasing Mrs. Laughton into town?"

Montagu stroked his smooth-shaven chin thoughtfully for an instant. "We followed her car for the same reason you did, Thorpe," he said dryly. "To catch up with her. Mrs. Laughton," the Englishman turned swiftly to Penelope, "let me have for safe keeping the document you refused to sign at the secret meeting of the Upper Ten Club."

Penelope's hand sought the pocket of her sport coat. Its flap, which she distinctly recalled having buttoned down in her mad rush for her roadster, was unfastened. Her hand slipped inside the deep pocket—it was empty. Penelope stared downward, her wildly beating heart half-suffocating her. Had she failed after all? With the document gone, who would believe her account of that mad evening? Which man had stolen it from her pocket?

The pause was infinitesimal, but when Penelope looked up she had regained her lost composure. She found Nelson Thorpe regarding her in sullen anger. Beloselsky's beadlike eyes were fixed upon her in open curiosity, while Mrs. Laughton's insulting stare plainly indicated her detestation of her

daughter-in-law. Inspector Mitchell, whom she had met that afternoon at police headquarters, and Celeste were both watching her with undisguised and fascinated interest; only Sir Gilbert Montagu's look appeared impersonal as he stood waiting in courteous silence for her answer to his request.

"Stand aside, I will come in. There is no use, McGuire, trying to stop me." Norma's fresh young voice, raised in anger, came distinctly to them, followed by a rush down the hallway, and she was in the library, clutching a reluctant and protesting Simpson by the arm. At sight of Sir Gilbert Montagu, the servant wrenched himself free and would have dodged into the hall, but the Englishman again occupied most of the door space and blocked his exit.

"Penelope," Norma strove to keep her voice lowered, to master her excitement, and control her inclination to hysterics, "I—Simpson and I—waited at your apartment until Detective Doyle told me of Tom's accident and that you were here with him; so I dragged Simpson over with me under pretense of getting you to advance me twelve thousand dollars."

"What?" The ejaculation escaped in chorus from Penelope and Montagu. "Why do you want such a sum of money?"

"Simpson, tell them why!" ordered Norma, and

her pent-up indignation found vent at last as she turned in scorn on the cowering servant. "What! You are afraid? Then I will." She looked across at Montagu, her loyal pride in him, and deep-abiding affection undisguised, unashamed. "Simpson claims that he followed you here, Gilbert, on Monday night, and saw you help Penelope down the fire escape—" She got no further.

"Ah!" The exclamation came from Mrs. Rutherford Laughton in one long-drawn, triumphant breath. She raised an accusing finger and pointed it at her daughter-in-law. "Your guilt has found you out! And the wages of sin are death."

Penelope shrank back from the almost maniacal fire which blazed in the older woman's eyes.

"Is your hatred so deep-seated that you would brand your son's wife a murderess on such flimsy testimony?" she asked, and the bitter, biting contempt in her voice cut like a whip lash. "The testimony of a blackmailer who dares not voice his thoughts aloud." She glanced at her silent companions. "The charge is monstrous!"

From an inner pocket Inspector Mitchell drew out a paper and stepping forward, extended it to Penelope.

"This warrant has been sworn out for your arrest," he stated simply, "for having murdered Clifford Burton in this room on Monday night."

A scream escaped Norma Page and was instantly smothered against her palm; it was the only sound that broke the solemn silence. She stared dumbly about her. It seemed to her excited imagination that all avoided her gaze. In her endeavor to confront Simpson with Gilbert Montagu and show the servant up for what he was, a lying, treacherous blackmailer, what had she not precipitated?

Penelope took the warrant and gazed dully at the lines upon it. Twice she strove to speak, each time her voice died in her throat; then as her sense of justice gathered force, her courage returned. Suddenly she woke to the fact that the inspector was still speaking.

"We have a complete case against you," he declared. "But it is my duty to warn you that whatever you admit will be used against you."

"Thanks." Her dry lips could hardly frame the mocking word. "As I appear condemned out of court, may I know your grounds for your false accusation?"

Mitchell reddened with vexation; so far he had not shaken her nerve; well, he would try again.

"Doyle," he called, and his eyes never left Penelope. "Bring the boy in here."

CHAPTER XX

FOILED

THE blood drained from Penelope's heart. What fresh torture was she to be put to? Of their own volition her eyelids closed, then opened slowly as one idea predominated in her reeling brain. Bobby, her son Bobby— As she raised her head, she looked straight into the eyes of a grinning, sheepish black boy.

"This is Joe," explained Inspector Mitchell. "The lad who ran the elevator here on Monday night. Joe, do you recognize this lady?"

"Yessir," Joe's eyes rolled in his head. "It's Missus Laughton, Master Bobby's mother. I done brung her up to dis hyar apartment on Monday night an' help her open de do', an' I see her enter, but I didn't never see her come out—an' I quit at midnight."

Inspector Mitchell waited in significant silence for Joe's statement to sink in, and then motioned to Doyle to withdraw.

"Take Joe to the station house and hold him as a material witness," he directed, and turned to Penelope. "Are you satisfied, madam?"

"Of the injustice of your accusation, yes," she responded, with undaunted spirit. "I *was* in this apartment Monday night—I don't deny it."

"Ah!" Mitchell's satisfaction was second only to that of Mrs. Rutherford Laughton, who followed every look and gesture made by Penelope with burning interest.

"But I do deny that I killed Clifford Burton," went on Penelope. "Why, I did not even know he was here that night."

Mitchell laughed aloud; his hour of triumph was at hand. "Your own handwriting gives the lie to your statement," he retorted, and held at a careful distance from her, but so that she could read it, a scrap of paper which bore the lines:

see you
to-night
apartment
L.

Penelope looked up, and the mockery in her glance penetrated even Mitchell's cock-sure conceit.

"Yes, I wrote that note to Mr. Burton," she admitted quietly. "But, Mr. Inspector, let me point out that you have only a fragment of it there—here is my whole message—" and whirling around, she drew a small memorandum pad and pencil, which lay on the table, toward her and wrote rapidly.

"Look—" and she held up the pad so that those who crowded about her could see what she had written:

DEAR MR. BURTON [the note ran]:
Thanks for the papers. Regret I cannot see you as you said to-night at the apartment.

P.L.

Reaching forward Mitchell took the note from her and compared it carefully with the scrap of paper, then slipped both inside his pocket. There was a glint of reluctant admiration in his eyes as he again faced Penelope. She was game, he could not deny that.

"To assert a thing is not proof," he said. "Did any one see you write that note?"

"No," with disarming honesty. "You must take my word for it," then noting his expression, she explained, with a touch of passion; "I am not trying to dupe you. I have told you I came to this apartment on Monday night. I came on impulse. Having returned unexpectedly to Washington, there was nobody to meet me at Union Station, and leaving my bags to be sent up to the Van Vleet, I walked home by way of Massachusetts and New Hampshire Avenues. As I went by the entrance of this apartment house, I stopped and asked Joe, who was loitering outside, if Bobby was back. He told me that the apartment was vacant and for rent furnished." Penelope paused and cleared her throat.

"Mr. Burton," she continued a second later, "had acted for me in the purchase of this apartment house, and with the deeds transferring the property to me, he sent the owner's master key, which gives access to each apartment. Joe told me that several 'parties' had looked at Mrs. Laughton's apartment with a view to renting it, and on impulse, I decided to look it over also."

A snort from Mrs. Laughton interrupted her. "Lies, lies!" She cried venomously. "Why pay attention to her, Mr. Inspector? Execute your orders as the law commands."

"I will, never fear," retorted Mitchell grimly. "Go on, madam," addressing Penelope; "your story is interesting."

"And true," she added swiftly. "The apartment to which I referred in my note to Mr. Burton was my own in the Van Vleet."

"Oh!" Mitchell considered her thoughtfully. Could he have been mistaken? No, it was not possible, the evidence was too strong, and her explanation too plausible. "If you came up here simply out of idle curiosity or possibly with a view to renting the apartment furnished, why did not Joe, the elevator boy, see you leave?"

"I did not go immediately," there was a little color at last in Penelope's white cheeks. "I admit I lingered, for there was much that touched me deeply,"

unconsciously her eyes traveled to the photograph of her husband in its silver frame on the mantel. "It was the first time in years that I had been in my little son's bedroom and—and—I—I played for hours with his toys and his books." She stopped to steady her voice, ashamed of the emotion she betrayed before her critical audience. "It was after midnight when I left."

Mitchell's gaze clashed with hers for a brief second.

"And at what hour did you return here," he demanded softly.

Penelope bit her lip until the blood came; the strain was telling upon her, sapping her courage, confusing her thoughts. She must not deviate from her story, she *must not.*

"I cannot tell you the exact time," she acknowledged, avoiding Norma's agonized gaze. "I was too excited, too—oh, I cannot explain—" with a graceful gesture which held infinite pathos. "There are times when one must be alone, and I walked about the streets instead of going to my home in the Van Vleet. Suddenly I missed—I missed—" she faltered, and Mitchell cut into the pause.

"Your handkerchief?" he interpolated, and held up a small object. "But when you cut it free from the fly paper, you carelessly left your last initial stuck to it."

Penelope looked at the mutilated initial in puzzled surprise. "Let me see it"; and as Mitchell held it closer, "it looks like the embroidery I use," she admitted, "but it happens that all mine are marked, a fad of mine, with the initials of my maiden name—'P.P.,' Penelope Page."

"Humph! Pretty thin!" sneered Mitchell, returning the torn handkerchief to his pocket. "If you didn't come for your handkerchief, what did bring you back here?"

"My husband's class ring," quietly. "I have grown much thinner, and I presume when I took off my gloves on first entering the apartment, the ring pulled off with them. I came back, irrespective of the time, because—" again her voice faltered, then, after a second, she went bravely on. "It was my engagement ring, and I did not wish to lose it here of all places."

Mrs. Rutherford Laughton's jeering laugh broke the silence.

"You are to be congratulated upon your vivid imagination," she mocked. "Come, tell us what you found here upon your return?"

"A dead man." Penelope's lips were ashen, and her eyes dark pools of suffering. "The sight of Clifford Burton lying on that table," she turned and pointed to it, "deprived me of my reasoning faculties, for I fled in terror—"

"Down the fire escape?" questioned Mitchell eagerly.

"Yes," faintly. "But Simpson lies when he says he saw me with Sir Gilbert Montagu."

Mitchell wheeled on the silent Englishman. "How about it, Sir Gilbert?"

In the acute silence Penelope heard her own irregular breathing—the pause seemed unending—her eyes swept the small group, then passed on to the doorway. Had she the strength to reach it? Even as she looked she saw the portière to the right shake slightly, then a large shapely hand dragged it aside and she saw her husband leaning against the door jamb.

"Cut out this foolery," he exclaimed roughly. "I stabbed Cliff Burton."

CHAPTER XXI

THE SOLITARY INITIAL

IN stunned silence they gazed at Commander Laughton. Penelope was the first to recover from the shock of his statement. In an instant she was by his side, her gaze turned in frantic, desperate appeal on Inspector Mitchell, who stood with mouth agape, for once taken completely off his feet. Laughton, in white shirt and blue trousers, his broken arm supported in splints and a bandage wound around his head, seemed to tower above his wife, who looked upon the point of swooning.

From the depths of her armchair Mrs. Rutherford Laughton stared at her son and daughter-in-law. A little froth, flecked with blood, appeared on her lips and her body twisted and turned, then fell back limply. No one noticed her condition, not even Celeste. With eyes half out of her head, the French woman appeared turned to marble as she watched the tableau enacted before her.

"Commander Laughton is overwrought," Penelope said, almost in a whisper, but in the tense silence every syllable was distinct and clear. "Pay no

attention to him, Inspector Mitchell. He is delirious."

"On the contrary, I am the only sane person in this room," declared Laughton. "Will you take my confession now, Inspector, or wait until we get to police headquarters?"

"Now," replied Mitchell cautiously; he felt that he was treading on unknown ground. Could it be possible that his first theory as to Commander Laughton's guilt was correct in spite of the evidence against the latter's wife? "There are plenty of witnesses here, and you can make a sworn statement later at headquarters."

"I reached Washington Monday night," began Laughton. "My train was hours late. I tried to get Sir Gilbert Montagu on the telephone from Union Station and failed, so came here. Not finding any one to run the elevator, I walked up the staircase to this apartment."

"And how did you enter?" asked Mitchell.

"The front door was ajar," briefly. "I went directly into the library and came face to face with Clifford Burton; we quarreled and I killed him."

"Clearly put," commented Mitchell quietly. "But your statement needs elaboration to be convincing; for instance, what did you and Burton quarrel over?" Then as Laughton remained silent: "Your wife?"

A dull red suffused Laughton's white face. Sud-

denly he put out his hand and drew Penelope to him and standing with his arm thrown protectingly about her shoulder, regarded his questioner with iron self-control.

"Indirectly, yes," he responded, and felt Penelope's convulsive start. "My mother had written me of an interview she had with Mr. Burton, whom I had known in the old days. She told me that he had called upon her in the capacity of my wife's lawyer to inquire what sum of money she thought I would take to permit my wife to divorce me."

Penelope could keep silent no longer. "The beast! The lying, treacherous beast!" she cried. "A divorce was ever farthest from my thoughts; it is even forbidden by the tenets of my religion." Her cheeks crimsoned almost to her brow. "That Mr. Burton considered himself in love with me, I bitterly regretted; it resulted in our becoming business acquaintances and nothing more."

"Hump!" The inspector's grunt betrayed his skepticism. "Well, go on, Commander; as you met Mr. Burton here quite by accident, how did you happen to have this weapon handy?" and he drew out from its oilskin wrapper a dagger.

"It was lying on the desk," nodding his head in the direction he meant. "One word with Burton led to another, and in a passion, I snatched up the knife and did for him."

"In the back?" Mitchell smiled as he saw Laughton wince. "Did all this transpire in the dark?"

"Why, no—that is—" catching himself up in evident confusion, "I had turned to go and when I tiptoed back again Burton had—had switched off the electric lights."

"To carry a candle," supplemented Mitchell softly; he was commencing to enjoy the situation again. "Had you ever been in this apartment before Monday night, Commander?"

"No."

"Then you were not familiar with your surroundings? With the location of the library, for instance?"

"No." The second monosyllable was given more curtly even than the first, and Mitchell's eyes brightened, as he put the next question.

"What time did you reach this apartment?"

"Between a quarter past one and two o'clock"; then Laughton added, "Tuesday morning, to be exact."

"And why was Mr. Burton carrying a candle when he was stabbed?" asked Mitchell.

Penelope felt the pressure of Laughton's hand on her shoulder grow unbearably heavy, but no sound escaped her white lips.

"I am sure I don't know why Burton carried a candle," replied Laughton. "He was eccentric, very;

perhaps," with a painful attempt to cover his increasing confusion, "Burton was, like Diogenes, looking for an honest man—"

"And, instead, found a murderer;" Mitchell's gruff tones deepened. "Commander Laughton, the killing of Burton was witnessed by Miss Norma Page, and according to her testimony this room was in darkness and Burton held a lighted candle in his hand just before he was stabbed in the back." Mitchell paused and cleared his throat. "I found out that from one to two o'clock, Tuesday morning, all electricity was shut off at the power house to make minor repairs. It was during that hour that Burton was murdered—by candlelight."

Laughton's broad shoulders sagged against the door jamb. No comment crossed his dry lips, and Mitchell broke the lengthening pause.

"Your attempt to extricate your wife from her dangerous situation by incriminating yourself is palpable to all," the inspector stated, with brutal frankness. "And the fact that even you consider her guilty—"

"No, by G—! I don't!" Laughton's denial was instant and rang out like a clarion call—it brought a new light to Penelope's lovely eyes, fresh courage to her sinking heart, and penetrated his mother's numbed brain. Celeste, the nearest to Mrs. Laughton, was the first to hear her moan.

"Mon Dieu!" she cried. "Ze poor madame, she haf had a fit," then as the others crowded about her chair. "Back, she must haf air. Ze salts, m'sieur; there, by you," Celeste's ministrations apparently brought relief, for the moaning ceased. Drawing a handkerchief from Mrs. Laughton's beaded bag, she gently wiped the latter's mouth and laid it down on the table close beside Inspector Mitchell's hand. The bit of white linen caught his eye and as he studied the finely embroidered initial in one corner his expression altered. The next second he had placed the torn bit of handkerchief, still adhering to the fly paper, side by side with the perfect handkerchief.

"They are mates," he exclaimed. "See for yourself, Sir Gilbert!"

Montagu, who had been telephoning for a doctor, moved swiftly to his side. "Correct!" he said. "By Jove!" turning over the handkerchief Celeste had placed on the table. "It has but the solitary initial, 'L'—so much for your theory of identification, Mitchell!" and he snapped his fingers derisively.

The Englishman spoke louder than he realized and looking up he caught Mrs. Laughton's eyes fixed full upon him. Her efforts to speak were painful to witness, and sounded like some dumb animal in torture.

"Mother!" Laughton dropped on one knee by her

chair. "Please don't make that horrible noise. Rest quietly until the doctor gets here."

Mrs. Laughton struggled up in her chair and pointed to Mitchell's notebook lying on the table; then beckoned with her finger. Reading her gesture aright, Mitchell placed the open book and his pencil in her lap. McGuire, entering the library in haste, stopped abruptly at sight of a scene which bore the elements of tragedy. Slowly, very slowly, Mrs. Laughton's shaking hand followed the iron will power, then dropped to her side as Mitchell took away his notebook—scrawled across the sheet was the message her lips could not utter:

"Bobby gave six of these handkerchiefs to me and six to his mother. The initial is from one of hers."

As Mrs. Laughton caught Mitchell's look of instant understanding, she sank back in her chair. Her eyes mirrored his satisfaction. Mitchell turned to Nelson Thorpe.

"Mr. Thorpe, I understand you are an expert on things oriental," his sharp, incisive tone caused the man addressed to straighten up involuntarily. "How would you describe this dagger which was used to kill Clifford Burton?"

"A Malay creese, undoubtedly," was the unhesitating response.

"Are such often found in the United States?"

"Not very often." Thorpe came a step nearer.

"That particular type is generally found in the possession of a collector. I had one like it," he checked himself and bit his lip as his glance sought Penelope. The by-play was not lost on Mitchell.

"What became of your Malay creese?" he demanded. "Come, sir, no evasions."

Thorpe's cheeks had turned an unhealthy color. Penelope cut short his stammering and stuttering as he strove to evade Mitchell's question.

"Do not overtax your memory, Mr. Thorpe," she said, with a flash of her old spirit. "You gave a similar creese to me."

"And what have you done with it?" demanded Mitchell.

"Nothing; so far as I know it is still in my apartment at the Van Vleet. Possibly," with a proud lift of her head, "you have already searched my apartment."

Mitchell disdained a reply. Pocketing his notebook, he buttoned his coat. "There is one more question before we go," he said, and the significant emphasis on "we" brought a lump to Penelope's throat. "You have stated, Mrs. Laughton, that you first stopped at this apartment early Monday evening, and spent some time here. Did you find it empty?"

"Yes."

"A-a-h!" Mitchell's slow spoken exclamation

indicated his feeling of triumph. "Your small son, in the presence of Coroner Penfield, told me he reached this apartment at nine o'clock and went at once to bed. You stated, before us, that you were in his room playing with his toys. Was he there with you?"

"No." Penelope spoke scarcely above a whisper; she dared not look at her husband, although conscious of his prolonged stare.

"Then which am I to believe—mother or son?"

As one hypnotized Penelope gazed at her tormentor; but for the chair against which she leaned, she would have fallen. No one spoke, no one came to her assistance. What was her husband doing? Had he moved?

A crash in the distance, followed by scampering footsteps, which came nearer and nearer, cut the stillness. A second later Bobby Laughton hurled himself through the portières.

"Don't let him catch me," he screamed, and dodged behind Beloselsky just in time to avoid Lopez' clutching fingers as the Russian tripped the tutor. The latter came down heavily, full length, and the shock of the fall knocked the breath from his body.

"Keep him there, don't let him get up," Bobby was dancing in his excitement and utterly oblivious of the presence of others; for once he saw the man he

loathed where he wanted him. "I was hiding in my room closet, and I saw Señor Lopez creep in an' pick up my boat," holding aloft his precious model of a U.S. destroyer. "And he opened the cabin door and stole the paper and ring I had hidden there. Make him give them back to me."

The room ceased whirling about Penelope; swiftly her chaotic thoughts took form and substance as her mind cleared.

"One moment," she called, and the urgency of her tone claimed the attention of all. "Señor Lopez was by my side in the crowd about my husband's wrecked automobile. He stole the document out of my pocket which you wanted, Sir Gilbert. Take it from him."

A malignant grin distorted Lopez' features as Beloselsky bent over him.

"Take it," he challenged the Russian, "if you can." And as Beloselsky attempted to rip his coat apart, he snapped a pair of handcuffs on the latter's wrists.

Slowly Beloselsky straightened up, and the terrified horror stamped on his twitching features stilled the words on Mitchell's lips.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Montagu as Lopez scrambled to his feet, and he laid a powerful hand on the man's shoulder. "Who are you?"

"Joseph Lopez," was the quiet response; "otherwise known as 'Spanish José,' of the United States

Secret Service." He opened his hand and disclosed a small disc, then pocketed it again. "Inspector Mitchell, I turn Boris Beloselsky over to you."

"On what grounds?" demanded Mitchell, regaining his voice.

"For the murder of his friend, Clifford Burton. Denial is useless," holding up an imperative hand as Beloselsky gave vent to a torrent of words. "I got to Washington too late to keep my appointment with Mr. Burton that night. I first learned of his murder the next morning from you, Beloselsky. Your tool there," pointing to Celeste, who, too terror-stricken to move, stood gaping at them, "tried to warn Commander Laughton by quoting Kipling's line: 'Beware of the bear that walks like a man,' in his *Truce of the Bear*. It was that note I stole from you, Commander Laughton, which confirmed my suspicions as to Beloselsky's guilt."

"You cannot convict me on such testimony," screamed the Russian, his voice discordant with fear as he met Lopez' dark eyes.

"The evidence against you will be brought out in full at your trial," retorted the secret service operative. "Suffice it to say that I have my telegram to Burton agreeing to meet him here, which Simpson, who has turned state's evidence, showed to you. I have, also, a letter from Burton in which he stated that he would no longer be blackmailed and bled by

you, and that he planned to turn you over to the police."

"So that was the motive for the crime," broke in Montagu.

"Yes," replied Lopez. "While Beloselsky is the representative of the Communist International of Moscow, he has made a large income as a blackmailer of society people. Burton's indiscretions with women made him an easy victim."

"Curse you!" The Russian whirled in fury upon Lopez. "Had I guessed your identity, you would never have foiled me." He shook the handcuffs upon his wrists in impotent wrath. "Burton came here ahead of his appointment and left the door ajar. I had followed him here and crept after him as he entered the library carrying a lighted candle. He picked up some object from the floor, a ring, I believe, and bent over to examine it—" Beloselsky's hoarse voice broke, and he drew his tongue over his parched lips. "The dagger struck deep into his back, and I fled."

"Quite so." Lopez' smile caused a chill to creep down Beloselsky's spine. "I delayed your arrest to gain important evidence against your fellow conspirators." He turned to his silent, horror-stricken companions. "Using his former prestige as a member of the old Russian diplomatic corps, Beloselsky has cloaked his activities for many months."

"By Jove!" ejaculated Montagu. "Pardon me, Lopez, pray go on."

The secret service operative turned to Penelope. "The document which you were called upon to sign to-night, Mrs. Laughton, under threat of arrest for Burton's murder, is a complete outline of the schemes of the Red forces to undermine the United States government. I took the envelope from your pocket in the crowd outside for I feared Beloselsky or his boon companion, Thorpe," pointing to him, "might trick you out of it. To-night was the first time I was ever admitted to a meeting of the Upper Ten Club. My membership in the organization was to enable me to keep in touch with their plots against the government."

Lopez crossed the room to the door. At his signal three men joined him. "Go with these agents, Celeste," he commanded, sternly; "you also, Thorpe. The chief will decide whether you are Beloselsky's dupe or willfully, with your eyes open, joined with him to arouse class hatred. Take Beloselsky with you, Mitchell." He waited until the men and their prisoners were out of earshot, then turned back into the library.

"Your mother's apartment, Commander," addressing Laughton, "has been used by Beloselsky as a meeting place, with Celeste's connivance. Bobby," Lopez crossed the room, "shake hands."

Bobby faced him squarely; the keen eyes which he had dreaded to encounter were moist, and the firm mouth he had often seen twisted into a sneering smile, wore a kindly expression which went straight to the boy's agitated heart.

"Why did you treat me so?" he gasped.

"I had to play my part, Bobby; a slip," Lopez drew his finger across his throat, "meant that." He looked across at Commander Laughton. "You have every right to be proud of your son. I hunted high and low for the key to the Russian code which Burton had surreptitiously secured from Beloselsky and promised to give me Monday night. By chance I came across it just now in Bobby's toy boat, where he had also hidden this ring." He dropped it as he spoke, into Bobby's hand. "You did your best, Bobby, to protect your mother. Good-by, lad, good luck!" and he was gone.

Bobby blinked vigorously, ashamed to show emotion. When his vision cleared, he saw Norma Page and Gilbert Montagu standing arm in arm near the fireplace. His glance traveled past them to his grandmother, who was gradually recovering from a partial stroke, leaving her a weak and unstrung witness of the drama unfolded before her.

"I lied when I said I got here at nine o'clock on Monday night," he explained valiantly, conscious that his father had sunk down on the chair beside

him. "It was ever and ever so much later. And I ran away to Aunt Polly's after Celeste unlocked the door to granny's closet. While I was in there I drew pictures on the walls with sulphur matches—I hope they scared Celeste," he smiled wanly. "It was 'cause I feared the p'lice that I hid at Aunt Polly's. I thought Señor Lopez was with Cousin Norma tonight, but when I found he wasn't I hooked a ride home on the back of her taxi."

Laughton drew his son to him. "Did you see Beloselsky kill Burton?"

"No." Bobby looked straight at his father. "I was coming from the bathroom when I saw mother walk down the hall. She looked so white and awful," Bobby's voice held a suspicious quaver in spite of his effort to keep it steady. "She scared me so I couldn't call out. After she was gone, I stole into the library and, oh, gee!" His feelings beggared description, and he gave up the attempt. "I recognized mother's ring, and I picked up that paper Señor Lopez was after, and I tried to get a handkerchief mother had dropped, but Cousin Norma came with Sir Gilbert and I had just time to cut the handkerchief off the fly-paper and reach my room, hide what I had found, and get into bed."

"Wait, Bobby," broke in Laughton. "What made you think the handkerchief was your mother's?"

"'Cause it had her initials P.L. on it," then as an exclamation escaped Penelope, a wave of color dyed his face. "It was one of the old ones I had seen her use when we all lived together, and," he faltered, "everybody was happy."

"Bobby!" Penelope's tender arms were about his tired body. "My dear, dear boy."

Three hours later Commander Laughton entered his wife's apartment in the Van Vleet and tiptoed cautiously by the drawing room in which stood Norma in earnest conversation with Sir Gilbert Montagu.

"I did see Mrs. Laughton come down the fire escape as I cut across lots to reach the Van Vleet," Laughton heard Montagu say. "I greatly feared Mrs. Laughton was seriously involved in Uncle Cliff's murder, and I was at a loss how to aid her and yet avenge Uncle Cliff. Simpson's statement that I helped her down the fire escape was a lie invented to get me into trouble."

"I never believed you guilty," declared Norma with loyal fervor. "But, oh, Gilbert, I longed to be the one to clear you of all suspicion."

"It was your woman's wit that located Bobby's hiding place when we all had failed," pointed out Montagu tenderly. "And Bobby was the key to the solution of many problems." He paused and taking a ring from his pocket slipped it on Norma's third

finger. "Sweetheart," his voice was tremulous with happiness, "will you marry me?"

Norma turned the ring on her finger; it bore the proud crest of the Montagus, with the motto in Norman French, "Straight to the mark," cut deep in the gold. Slowly she raised her radiant face and met his ardent gaze.

"Yes, Gilbert," she whispered, and as his strong arms closed about her, Norma saw in her lover's eyes the light that never is on land or sea.

As Laughton stepped inside his wife's boudoir she looked up with a finger on her lip.

"S-s-h!" she whispered. "Bobby has just dropped to sleep." With her husband's help she rose from her cramped position by the couch and, his uninjured arm still encircling her, they walked into the next room.

"I have just left two perfectly happy people, Norma and Gilbert—no, they don't want you now—but I do." Laughton's arm tightened about her. "Penelope, how can I ever make up to you for the misery which my unjust suspicions, my insane jealousy brought to you. My unhappy mother—"

"Hush!" Penelope laid her finger across his lips. "Do not let us forget she is your mother."

Laughton noted the haggard lines under her happy eyes, her utter weariness and his heart smote him.

"Dearest, best beloved," he murmured tenderly.

"Look—" He pointed through the open window to the first faint traces of dawn. "Let that be our happy omen for the future."

And as Penelope caught his adoring look, the words of the beautiful old Psalm came to her, and she repeated them aloud:

> Weeping may endure for a night,
> But joy cometh in the morning.

(1)

THE END